Gunston Classics

PENNY PARKER MYSTERY STORIES

CLUE *of the* SILKEN LADDER

by MILDRED A. WIRT

Gunston Classics

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Clue of the Silken Ladder

MILDRED A. WIRT

PENNY PARKER MYSTERY STORIES
1941

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"It's a ladder, Lou! A ladder made of silk!"

CHAPTER 1
DOUBLE TROUBLE

Now I ask you, Lou, what have I done to deserve such a fate?"

Jerking a yellow card from beneath the windshield of the shiny new maroon-colored sedan, Penny Parker turned flashing blue eyes upon her companion, Louise Sidell.

"Well, Penny," responded her chum dryly, "in Riverview persons who park their cars beside fire hydrants usually expect to get parking tickets."

"But we were only inside the drugstore five minutes. Wouldn't you think a policeman could find something else to do?"

"Oh, the ticket won't cost you more than five or ten dollars," teased Louise wickedly. "Your father should pay it."

"He should but he won't," Penny answered gloomily. "Dad expects his one and only daughter to assume her own car expense. I ask you, what's the good of having a weekly allowance when you never get to use it yourself?"

"You _are_ in a mood today. Why, I think you're lucky to have a grand new car."

Louise's glance caressed the highly polished chrome plate, the sleek, streamlined body which shone in the sunlight. The automobile had been presented to Penny by her father, Anthony Parker, largely in gratitude

because she had saved his newspaper, _The Riverview Star_, from a disastrous law suit.

"Yes, I am lucky," Penny agreed without enthusiasm. "All the same, I'm lonesome for my old coupe, Leaping Lena. I wish I could have kept her. She was traded in on this model."

"What would you do with that old wreck now, Penny? Nearly every time we went around a corner it broke down."

"All the same, we had marvelous times with her. This car takes twice as much gasoline. Another thing, all the policemen knew Lena. They never gave her a ticket for anything."

Penny sighed deeply. Pocketing the yellow card, she squeezed behind the steering wheel.

"By the way, whatever became of Lena?" Louise asked curiously, slamming the car door. She glanced sharply at Penny.

"Oh, she's changed hands twice. Now she's at Jake Harriman's lot, advertised for fifty dollars. Want to drive past there?"

"Not particularly. But I'll do it for your sake, pet."

As the car started toward the Harriman Car Lot, Louise stole an amused glance at her chum. Penny was not unattractive, even when submerged in gloom. Upon the slightest provocation, her blue eyes sparkled; her smile when she chose to turn it on, would melt a man of stone. She dressed carelessly, brushed a mop of curly, golden hair only if it suited her fancy, yet somehow achieved an appearance envied by her friends.

The automobile drew up at the curb.

"There's Lena." Penny pointed to an ancient blue coupe with battered

fenders which stood on the crowded second-hand lot. A _For Sale_ sign on the windshield informed the public that the auto might be bought for forty dollars.

"Lena's value seems to have dropped ten dollars," commented Louise. “My, I had forgotten how wrecky the old thing looks!"

"Don't speak of her so disrespectfully, Lou. All she needs is a good waxing and a little paint."

The girls crossed the lot to inspect the coupe. As they were gazing at it, Jake, the lot owner, sidled toward them, beaming ingratiatingly.

"Good afternoon, young ladies. May I interest you in a car?"

"No, thank you," replied Penny. "We're just looking."

"Now here is a fine car," went on the dealer, indicating the coupe. “A 1934 model--good mechanical condition; nice rubber; a lively battery and fair paint. You can't go wrong, ladies, not at a price of forty dollars."

"But will it run?" asked Louise, smothering a giggle.

"There's thousands of miles of good service left in this little car, ladies. And the price is only fifteen dollars above the junk value."

The thought of Leaping Lena coming to an inglorious end in a junk yard was disconcerting to Penny. She walked slowly about the car, inspecting it from every angle.

"Forty dollars is too much for this old wreck," she said firmly.

"Why, Penny, such disrespect!" mocked Louise.

Penny frowned down her chum. Sentiment and business were two different matters.

"What _will_ you give?" inquired the car owner alertly.

"Not a cent over twenty-five."

Louise clutched Penny's arm, trying to pull her away.

"Have you lost your mind?" she demanded. "What could you do with this old car when you already have a new one?"

Penny did not listen. She kept gazing at the coupe as one who had been hypnotized.

"I'd take it in a minute, only I don't have twenty-five dollars in cash."

"How much can you raise?" asked the dealer.

"Not more than five dollars, I'm afraid. But my father is publisher of the _Riverview Star_."

Jake Harriman's brows unknitted as if by magic.

"Anthony Parker's daughter," he said, smiling. "That's plenty good enough for me. I'll sell you the best car on the lot for nothing down. Just come inside the office and sign a note for the amount. Will that be okay?"

Disregarding Louise's whispered protests, Penny assured the dealer that the arrangement would be perfectly satisfactory. The note was signed, and five dollars in cash given to bind the bargain.

"I'll throw in a few gallons of gas," the man offered.

However, Jake Harriman's gasoline did not seem suited to Leaping Lena's
dyspeptic ignition. She coughed feebly once or twice and then died for
the day.

"You have acquired a bargain, I must say!" exclaimed Louise. "You can’t even get the car home."

"Yes, I can," Penny insisted. "I'll tow her. A little tinkering and she'll be as good as new."

"You're optimistic, to say the least," laughed Louise.

Penny produced a steel cable from the tool kit of the maroon sedan, and Jake Harriman coupled the two cars together.

"Penny, what will your father say when he learns of this?" Louise inquired dubiously. "On top of a parking ticket, too!"

"Oh, I'll meet that problem when I come to it," Penny answered carelessly. "Louise, you steer Lena. I'll drive the sedan."

Shaking her head sadly, Louise climbed into the old car. Although Penny was her dearest friend she was forced to admit that the girl often did bewildering things. Penny's mother was dead and for many years she had been raised by a housekeeper, Mrs. Maud Weems. Secretly Louise wondered if it were not the housekeeper who had been trained. At any rate, Penny enjoyed unusual freedom for a high school girl, and her philosophy of life was summed up in one headline: ACTION.

Penny put the sedan in gear, towing the coupe slowly down the street. The two vehicles traveled several blocks before a hill loomed ahead. Penny considered turning back, and then decided that the cars could make the steep climb easily.

However, midway up the hill the sedan suddenly leaped forward as if released from a heavy burden. At the same instant Lena's horn gave a sharp warning blast.

Glancing into the mirror, Penny was horrified to see Leaping Lena careening backwards down the steep slope. The tow rope had unfastened.

Bringing the sedan to the curb, she jerked on the hand brake, and sprang to the pavement. Louise, bewildered and frightened, was trying desperately to control the coupe. The

car gathered speed, wobbling crazily toward the line of traffic.

"Guide it! Guide it!" shouted Penny. "Put on the brakes!"

So confused was Louise that she lost her head completely. Straight toward a long black limousine rolled the coupe. The chauffeur spun his wheel, but too late. There was a loud crash as the two cars came together.

Penny raced down the hill to help her chum from the coupe.

"Are you hurt?" she asked anxiously.

Louise shook her head, wailing: "Penny Parker, just see what has happened now! You never should have bought this stupid old wreck!"

Both the chauffeur and an elderly gentleman who carried a cane, alighted from the limousine. With grim faces they surveyed the fender which had been crushed.

"The owner is Mr. Kohl," Louise whispered nervously. "You know, president of the First National Bank."

The banker did not recognize either of the girls. Addressing them both, he made several pointed remarks to the effect that irresponsible young people were very thoughtless to endanger the property of others with their ancient "jalopies."

"It was entirely my fault, Mr. Kohl," acknowledged Penny meekly. “Of course, I'll pay for the fender."

The banker softened somewhat, gazing at the girls in a thoughtful, more friendly way.

"Haven't I seen you somewhere before?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Kohl." Penny was quick to press for an advantage. "Why, I am one of your best customers. Ever since I was six years old I’ve trusted your bank with my savings!"

"I remember you now," said Mr. Kohl, smiling. "You're the Parker girl."

Adding a mental note that Anthony Parker actually was one of the bank's largest depositors, he decided it would be excellent policy to make lightof the accident. A moment later as a policeman came to investigate, he insisted that the incident had been unavoidable and that it would be a mistake to arrest the girls.

"Mr. Kohl, you were noble, absolutely noble," declared Penny gratefully after the policeman had gone. "The least I can do is to pay for the damage."

"I'll stop at Sherman's Garage and have a new fender put on," the banker responded. "The bill can be sent to your father."

After Mr. Kohl had driven away, Louise helped Penny hook the coupe to the sedan once more. She remarked cuttingly:

"You've done right well today. One parking ticket, a bill for twenty-five dollars, and another one coming up. Just what _will_ your father say?"

"Plenty," sighed Penny. "I wonder if it might not be a good idea to break
the news by easy stages? Perhaps he'll take it more calmly if I telephone."

"Don't be too sure."

The street was a narrow, dingy one with few business houses. Noticing a
Japanese store which bore a sign, "Kano's Curio Shop," she started toward
it, intending to seek a public telephone.

Louise seized her arm. "Penny, you're not going in there!"

"Why not?"

"This is Dorr Street--one of the worst places in Riverview."

"Oh, don't be silly," chuckled Penny. "It's perfectly safe by daylight. I'll go alone if you're afraid."

Thus challenged, Louise indignantly denied that she was afraid, and accompanied her chum.

The door of Mr. Kano's shop stood invitingly open. Pausing on the threshold, the girls caught a pleasant aroma of sandalwood.

So quietly did Louise and Penny enter that the elderly, white-haired shop owner did not immediately see them. He sat behind a high counter, engrossed in something he was sewing.

"Good afternoon," said Penny pleasantly.

The Japanese glanced up quickly and as quickly thrust his work beneath the counter. Recovering poise, he bowed to the girls.

"May we use your telephone if you have one?" Penny requested.

"So very sorry, Miss," the Japanese responded, bowing again. "Have no telephone."

Penny nodded, absently fingering a tray of tiny ivory figures. The Japanese watched her, and mistaking curiosity for buying interest, brought additional pieces for her to inspect. The curios were all too expensive for Penny's purse, but after endless debate she bought a pair of wooden clogs. The shop owner padded away into a back room, intending to wrap the package for her.

Scarcely had he vanished when Penny turned excitedly to her chum.

"Lou, did you notice how funny he acted when we came in here?"

"Yes, he didn't want us to see what he was making evidently."

"Exactly what I thought! But we'll fool Mr. Kano!"

Giving Louise no opportunity to protest, Penny boldly peered behind the counter.

"Here it is," she whispered. "But _what_ is it?"

Hidden in a pasteboard box lay coil upon coil of what appeared to be fine, black silk rope. Curiously, she lifted it up, exposing a network of crossbars.

"Well, of all things!" she exclaimed. "It's a ladder, Lou! A ladder made of silk!"

CHAPTER 2
A ROPE OF SILK

Even as Penny spoke, she felt a hard, warning tug on her skirt. Quickly she turned around.

In the doorway stood the old Japanese. His smile was not pleasant tobehold.

"We-we were just looking at this rope," Penny stammered, trying to carry off the situation with dignity. "I hope you don't mind."

The Japanese shopkeeper gazed steadily at the girl, his face an emotionless mask. Since he spoke no word, it became increasingly evident that he regarded her with anger and suspicion.

"May I ask what use is made of this silk rope?" Penny inquired. "Do you sell it for a special purpose?"

The Japanese coldly ignored the direct questions.

"So very sorry to have kept you waiting," he said softly. "Your change please."

Penny knew that she deserved the rebuke. Accepting the package and coins, she and Louise hastily left the shop. Not until they were some distance away did the latter speak.

"Penny, you would do a trick like that! One of these days your curiosity will get us into serious trouble."

"At least I learned what was hidden behind the counter," chuckled Penny. "But that Jap didn't seem very eager to answer my questions."

"Can you blame him? It certainly was none of our affair what he kept inside the box."

"Perhaps not, Lou, but you must admit he acted strangely when we first entered the shop. You know--as if we had surprised him in a questionable act."

"He naturally was startled. We came in so quietly."

"All the same, I'm not one bit sorry I looked behind the counter," Penny maintained. "I like to learn about things."

"I agree with you there!"

"Lou, what purpose do you suppose silk ladders serve? Who uses them and why?"

"Now, how should I know? Penny, you ask enough questions to be master of ceremonies on a radio quiz program."

"I can't recall ever having seen a silk ladder before," Penny resumed, undisturbed by her chum's quip. "Would acrobats use them, do you think?"

"Not to my knowledge," Louise answered. "If I were in your shoes I should worry about more serious matters than those connected with a mere silk ladder."

"The world is filled with serious things," sighed Penny. "But mystery! One doesn't run into it every day."

"You do," said Louise brutally. "If a stranger twitches his ears twice you immediately suspect him of villainy."

"Nevertheless, being of a suspicious nature won me a new car," Penny defended herself. "Don't forget Dad gave it to me for solving a mystery,

for telling his newspaper readers what was going on _Behind the Green Door_."

"Oh, your curiosity has paid dividends," Louise admitted with a laugh. "Take for instance the time you trailed the _Vanishing Houseboat_, and again when you lowered the Kippenberg drawbridge to capture a boatload of crooks! Those were the days!"

"Why dwell in the past, Lou? Now take this affair of the silk ladder--"

"I'm afraid _you'll_ have to take it," Louise interrupted. "Do you realize it's nearly four o'clock? In exactly ten minutes I am supposed to be at the auditorium for orchestra practice."

"Lou, you can't desert me now," Penny protested quickly. "How will I get Lena home? I need you to steer her."

"Thanks, but I don't trust your tow rope."

"At least go as far as the _Star_ office with me. Once there, maybe I can get one of the reporters to help me the rest of the way."

"Oh, all right," Louise consented. "But the _Star_ office is my absolute limit."

Deciding not to take time to telephone her father, Penny once more climbed into the maroon sedan, posting Louise behind the wheel of the
coupe. At a cautious speed the two cars proceeded along the street, coming presently to a large corner building which housed the _Riverview
Star_. No parking space being available on the street, Penny pulled into the newspaper plant's loading dock.

"Say, you!" shouted a man who was tossing stacks of freshly inked papers into a truck. "You can't park that caravan in here!"

Penny's eyes danced mischievously.

"Oh, it's quite all right," she said. "I guess you don't know who I am."

"Sure, I do," the trucker grinned. "But your dad gave orders that the next time you tried to pull that daughter-of-the-publisher stuff we were to bounce you! This dock is for _Star_ trucks."

"Why, the very idea," said Penny, with pretended injury. "The night edition doesn't roll for an hour and I'll be away from here before then!
Besides, this is a great emergency! When Dad hears about all the trouble
I'm in, a little matter such as this won't even ruffle him."

"Okay, chase along," the trucker returned good-naturedly. "But see to it that you're out of here within an hour."

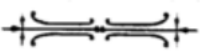
Penny bade Louise good-bye, and with plaid skirt swinging jauntily, crossed the cement runway to the rear elevator entrance. Without waiting for the cage to descend, she took the steps two at a time, arriving at the editorial floor gasping for breath.

"What's your rush?" inquired an amused voice. "Going to a fire?"

Jerry Livingston, ace reporter for the _Star_, leaned indolently against the grillwork of the elevator shaft, his finger pressed on the signal button. He and Penny were friends of long standing.

"Oh, hello, Jerry!" Penny greeted him breathlessly. "Guess what? I've just come from Dorr Street--Kano's Curio Shop--and I had the most amazing adventure!"

"I can imagine," grinned Jerry. "If you breezed through the place the way you do this building, you must have left it in ruins."



"Just for that, I won't tell you a thing, not a thing," retorted Penny. "What sort of a mood is Dad in today?"

"Well, I heard him tell DeWitt that unless the news output improves on this sheet, he aims to fire half the force."

"Sounds like Dad on one of his bad days," Penny sighed. "Maybe I should skip home without seeing him."

"Trouble with the old allowance again?" Jerry asked sympathetically.

"You don't know the half of it. I'm submerged so deeply in debt that I'll be an old lady before I get out, unless Dad comes to my rescue."

"Well, good luck," chuckled Jerry. "You'll need it!"

Walking through the newsroom, between aisles of desks where busy reporters tapped on their typewriters, Penny paused before a door marked: -Anthony Parker, Editor- Listening a moment and hearing no voices within, she knocked and entered. Her father, a lean, dignified man with tired lines about his eyes and mouth, sat working at his desk. He smiled as he saw his daughter, and waved her toward a chair.

Instead, Penny perched herself on a corner of the desk.

"Dad, I have a splendid surprise for you," she began brightly. "I've just accomplished a wonderful stroke of business!"

"Never mind beating about the bush," interrupted Mr. Parker. "Shoot me the facts straight. What have you done this time?"

"Dad, your tone! I've bought back my old car, Leaping Lena. And it only cost me a trifling sum."

Mr. Parker's chair squeaked as he whirled around.

"You've done _what_?"

"It's a long story, Dad. Now don't think that I fail to appreciate the grand new car you gave me last winter. I love it. But between Lena and me there exists a deep bond of affection. Today when I saw her on Jake Harriman's lot looking so weather-beaten and unhappy--why, a little voice inside me whispered: 'Penny, why don't you buy her back?' So I did."

"Never mind the sentimental touches. When I gave you the new car I thought we were well rid of Lena. How much did you pay for it?"

"Oh, Lena was a marvelous bargain. Five dollars cash and a note for twenty more. The man said you could pay for it at your convenience."

"Very considerate of him," Mr. Parker remarked ironically. "Now that we have three cars, and a double garage, where do you propose to keep Lena?"

"Oh, anywhere. In the back yard."

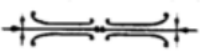
"Not on the lawn, young lady. And what do you plan to do with two cars?"

"The maroon one for style, and Lena when I want a good time. Why, Dad, she bears the autographs of nearly all my school friends! I should keep her as a souvenir, if for no other reason."

"Penny, it's high time you learned a few lessons in finance." Mr. Parker spoke sternly although his mouth twitched slightly. "I regret that I cannot assume your debts."

"But Dad! I'm a minor--under legal age. Isn't it a law that a father has to support his child?"

"A child, but not two cars. If you decide to take the case to court, I think any reasonable judge will understand my viewpoint. I repeat, the debt is yours, not mine."



"How will I pay?" asked Penny gloomily. "I've already borrowed on my allowance for a month ahead."

"I know," said her father. "However, with your ingenuity I am sure you can manage."

Penny drew a deep breath. Argument, she realized, would be utterly useless. While her father might be mildly amused by her predicament, he never would change his decision.

"Since you won't pay for Lena, I suppose it's useless to mention Mr. Kohl's fender," she said despairingly.

"Does he have one?"

"Please don't try to be funny, Dad. This is tragic. While I was towing Lena, the rope broke and smash went the fender of Mr. Kohl's slinky black limousine."

"Interesting."

"I had to promise to pay for it to keep from being arrested. Oh, yes, and before that I acquired this little thing."

Penny tossed the yellow card across the desk.

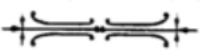
"A parking ticket! Penny, how many times--" Mr. Parker checked himself, finishing in a calm voice: "This, too, is your debt. It may cost you five dollars."

"Dad, you know I can't pay. Think how your reputation will be tarnished if I am sent to jail."

Mr. Parker smiled and reached as if to take money from his pocket. Reconsidering, he shook his head.

"I know the warden well," he said. "I'll arrange for you to be assigned to one of the better cells."

"Is there nothing which will move you to generosity?" pleaded Penny.



"Nothing."

Retrieving the parking ticket, Penny jammed it into her pocket. Before she could leave there came a rap on the door. In response to Mr. Parker's "Come in," Mr. DeWitt, the city editor, entered.

"Sorry to bother you, Chief."

"What's wrong now, DeWitt?" the publisher inquired.

"Miss Hilderman was taken sick a few minutes ago. We had to send her home in a cab."

"It's nothing serious I hope," said Mr. Parker with concern.

"A mild heart attack. She'll be out a week, if not longer."

"I see. Be sure to have the treasurer give her full pay. You have someone to take her place?"

"That's the problem," moaned DeWitt. "Her assistant is on vacation. I don't know where we can get a trained society editor on short notice."

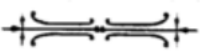
"Well, do the best you can."

DeWitt lingered, fingering a paper weight.

"The society page for the Sunday paper is only half finished," he explained. "Deadline's in less than an hour. Not a chance we can pick up anyone in time to meet it."

Penny spoke unexpectedly. "Mr. DeWitt, perhaps I can help you. I'm a whiz when it comes to writing society. Remember the Kippenberg wedding I covered?"

"Do I?" DeWitt's face relaxed into a broad grin. "That was a real write-up. Say, maybe you could take over Miss Hilderman's job until we can replace her."



"Service is my motto." Penny eyed her father questioningly. "It might save the _Star_ from going to press minus a society page. How about it, Dad?"

"It certainly would solve our problem," contributed DeWitt. "Of course the undertaking might be too great a one for your daughter." He winked at Penny.

"She'll have no difficulty in taking over," said Mr. Parker stiffly. "None whatsoever."

"Then I'll start her in at once," DeWitt replied. "Come with me, Miss Parker."

At the door Penny paused and discreetly allowed the city editor to get beyond hearing. Then, turning to her father she remarked innocently:

"Oh, by the way, we overlooked one trifling detail. The salary!"

The editor made a grimace. "I might have expected this. Very well, I'll pay you the same as I do Miss Hilderman. Twenty-five a week."

"Why, that would just take care of my debt to Jake Harriman," protested Penny. "I simply can't do high pressure work without high pay. Shall we make it fifty a week?"

"So you're holding me up?"

"Certainly not," chuckled Penny. "Merely using my ingenuity. Am I hired?"

"Yes, you win," answered Mr. Parker grimly. "But see to it that you turn out good work. Otherwise, you soon may find yourself on the _Star's_ inactive list."

CHAPTER 3 SOCIETY ROUTINE

Penny followed City Editor DeWitt to a small, glass-enclosed office along the left hand wall of the newsroom. Miss Hilderman's desk was cluttered with sheets of copy paper which bore scribbled notations, items telephoned to the _Star_ but not yet type-written.

"There should be a date book around here somewhere," DeWitt remarked.

Finally he found it in one of the desk drawers. Penny drew a deep breath as she scanned the long list of social events which must be covered for the Sunday page.

"Do the best you can," DeWitt said encouragingly. "Work fast, but be careful of names."

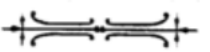
The telephone bell rang. As Penny reached for the receiver, DeWitt retreated to his own domain.

"Hello, Miss Hilderman?" a feminine voice cooed, "I wish to report a meeting, please."

"Miss Hilderman isn't here this afternoon," replied Penny politely. “I will take the item."

Gathering up paper and pencil, she slid into the revolving chair behind the telephone, poised for action.

"Yes," she urged, "I am ready."



There was a lengthy pause, and then the woman at the other end of the line recited as if she were reading from a paper:

"'A meeting of the Mystical Society of Celestial Thought, Order of Amar, 67, will be held Tuesday night at eight o'clock in the Temple, 426 Butternut Lane. The public is cordially invited.'"

"What sort of society is the Order of Amar?" Penny inquired curiously, taking notes. "I never heard of it before."

"Why, my dear, the society is very well known," the woman replied. “We hold our meetings regularly, communing with the spirits. I do hope that the item appears in print. So often Miss Hilderman has been careless about it."

"I'll see that the item is printed under club notices," Penny promised. "Your name, please?"

The woman had hung up the receiver, so with a shrug, Penny typed the item and speared it on a wire spindle. For the next hour she was kept busy with other telephone calls and the more important stories which had to be rushed through. Copy flowed steadily from her office by way of the pneumatic tube to the composing room.

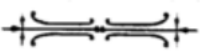
Shortly after five o'clock, DeWitt dropped in for a moment to praise her for her speed and accuracy.

"You're doing all right," he said. "So far I've only caught you in one mistake. Mignonette is spelled with a double t."

"This job wouldn't be half bad if only brides could learn to carry flowers with easy names," laughed Penny. "When I get married I'll have violets and sweet peas!"

DeWitt reached for the copy on the spindle. "What's this?" he asked. "More to go?"

"Club notices."



The editor tore the sheet from the wire, reading it as he walked toward the door. Abruptly, he paused and turned toward her.

"Miss Parker, this can't go through."

"Why, what is wrong?" Penny asked in surprise. "Have I made another error in spelling?"

DeWitt tore off the lead item and tossed it on her desk.

"It's this meeting of the so-called Mystical Society of Celestial Thought. The _Star_ never runs stuff like that, not even as a paid advertisement."

"I thought it was a regular lodge meeting, Mr. DeWitt."

"Nothing of the sort. Merely a free advertisement for a group of mediums and charlatans."

"Oh, I didn't know," murmured Penny.

"These meetings have only one purpose," Mr. DeWitt resumed. "To lure victims who later may be fleeced of their money."

"But if that is so, why don't police close up the place?" Penny demanded. "Why doesn't the _Star_ run an expose story?"

"Because evidence isn't easy to get. The meetings usually are well within the law. Whenever a police detective or a reporter attends, the services are decorous. But they provide the mediums with a list of suckers."

Penny would have asked DeWitt for additional information had not the city editor walked hurriedly away. Scrambling the item into a ball, she tossed it into the waste paper basket. Then upon second thought she retrieved it and carefully smoothed the paper.

"Perhaps, I'll drop around at the Temple sometime just to see what it is

like," she decided, placing the item in her pocket. "It would be interesting to learn what is going on there."

For the next half hour Penny had no time to think of the Celestial Temple. However, at twenty minutes before six, when her father came into the office, she was well ahead of her work.

"Hello, Penny," he greeted her. "How do you like your new job?"

"Fine and dandy. Only routine items rather cramp one's style. Now if I were a regular reporter instead of a society editor, I know several stories which would be my dish!"

"For instance?" inquired Mr. Parker, smiling.

"First, there's an Oriental Shop on Dorr Street that I should investigate. The Japanese owner acted very mysteriously today when I went there. Louise and I saw him making a silk ladder, and he refused to reveal its purpose."

"A silk ladder?" repeated Mr. Parker. "Odd perhaps, but hardly worthy of a news story."

"Dad, I only wish you had _seen_ that old Japanese--the sinister way he looked at me. Oh, he's guilty of some crime. I feel it."

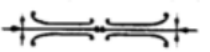
"The _Star_ requires facts, not fancy or emotion," Mr. Parker rejoined. "Better devote your talents to routine society items if you expect to remain on my payroll."

Penny took the announcement of the Celestial Thought meeting from her pocket and offered it to the publisher.

"Here's one which might be interesting," she said. "How about assigning me to it after I get this society job in hand?"

Mr. Parker read the item and his eyes blazed with anger.

"Do you know what this means, Penny?"



"Mr. DeWitt told me a little about the Celestial Temple society. He said the paper never ran such items."

"Certainly not! Why, I should like nothing better than to see the entire outfit driven out of town! Riverview is honeycombed with mediums, fortune tellers and faith healers!"

"Perhaps they mean no harm, Dad."

"I'll grant there may be a small number of persons who honestly try to communicate with the spirit world," Mr. Parker replied. "My concern is not with them, but with a group of professional mediums who lately have invaded the city. Charlatans, crooks--the entire lot!"

"Why don't you write an editorial about it?" Penny suggested.

"An editorial! I am seriously tempted to start a vigorous campaign, but the trouble is, the police cannot be depended upon to cooperate actively."

"Why, Dad?"

"Because experience has proven that such campaigns are not often successful. Evidence is hard to gain. If one place is closed up, others open in different sections of the city. The mediums and seers operate from dozens of private homes. When the police stage raids they acquire no evidence, and only succeed in making the department look ridiculous."

"Yet the mediums continue to fleece the public?"

"The more gullible strata of it. Until recent months the situation here has been no worse than in other cities of comparable size. Lately an increasing number of charlatans has moved in on us."

"Why don't you start a campaign, Dad?" Penny urged. "You would be doing the public a worthwhile service."

"Well, I hesitate to start something which I may be unable to finish."

"At least the public deserves to be warned."

"Unfortunately, Penny, many persons would take the attitude that the Star- was persecuting sincere spiritualists. A campaign must be based on absolute evidence."

"Can't it be obtained?"

"Not without great difficulty. These mediums are a clever lot, Penny. They prey upon the superstitions of their intended victims."

"I wish you would let me work on the story, Dad."

"No, Penny," responded her father. "You attend to your society and allow DeWitt to worry about the Celestial Temple crowd. Even if I should launch a campaign, I couldn't allow you to become mixed up in the affair."

The telephone bell jingled. With a tired sigh, Penny reached for the receiver.

"Society desk," she said mechanically.

"I am trying to trace Mr. Parker," informed the office exchange operator. "Is he with you, Miss Parker?"

"Telephone, Dad," said Penny, offering him the receiver.

Mr. Parker waited a moment for another connection to be made. Then Penny heard him say:

"Oh, it's you, Mrs. Weems? What's that? Repeat it, please."

From her father's tone, Penny felt certain that something had gone wrong at home. She arose, waiting anxiously.

Mr. Parker clicked the receiver several times. "Apparently, Mrs. Weems
hung up," he commented.

"Is anything the matter, Dad?"

"I don't know," Mr. Parker admitted, his face troubled. "Mrs. Weems
seemed very excited. She requested me to come home as soon as possible.
Then the connection was broken."

"Why don't you try to reach her again?"

Mr. Parker placed an out-going call, but after ten minutes the operator reported that she was unable to contact the housekeeper.

"Mrs. Weems never would have telephoned if something unusual hadn’t happened," Penny declared uneasily. "Perhaps, she's injured herself."

"You think of such unpleasant things."

"Something dreadful must have happened," Penny insisted. "Otherwise, why doesn't she answer?"

"We're only wasting time in idle speculation," Mr. Parker said crisply. "Get your things, Penny. We'll start home at once!"

CHAPTER 4
A TURN OF FORTUNE

Penny immediately locked her desk and gathered up hat and gloves. She was hard pressed to keep pace with her father as they hastened to the elevator.

"By the way, you have your car downstairs?" the publisher inquired absently. He seldom drove his own automobile to the office.

"What a memory you have, Dad!" chuckled Penny. "Yes, I have all two of them! Parked in the loading dock for convenience."

"Penny, haven't I told you a dozen times--" Mr. Parker began, only to check himself. "Well, it will save us time now. However, we may discuss a few matters when we get home."

The elevator shot them down to the first floor. Leaping Lena and the maroon sedan remained in the loading dock with a string of _Star_ paper trucks blocking a portion of the street.

"Hey, sister," a trucker called angrily to Penny. "It's time you're getting these cars out of here." He broke off as he recognized Mr. Parker and faded behind one of the trucks.

"Dad, do you mind steering Lena?" Penny asked demurely. "We can't leave her here. You can see for yourself that she seems to be blocking traffic."

"Yes, I see," Mr. Parker responded grimly.

"Of course, if you would feel more dignified driving the sedan--"

"Let me have the keys," the publisher interrupted. "The important thing is to get home without delay."

Penny became sober, and slid into her place at the wheel of Leaping Lena. Amid the smiles of the truckers, Mr. Parker drove the two cars out of the dock.

Once underway, the caravan made reckless progress through rush-hour traffic. More than once Penny whispered a prayer as Lena swayed around a corner, missing other cars by scant inches.

Presently the two automobiles drew up before a pleasant, tree-shaded home built upon a high terrace overlooking a winding river. Penny and her father alighted, walking hurriedly toward the front porch.

The door stood open and from within came the reassuring howl of a radio turned too high.

"Nothing so very serious can have happened," remarked Penny. “Otherwise, Mrs. Weems wouldn't have that thing going full blast."

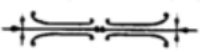
At the sound of footsteps, the housekeeper herself came into the living room from the kitchen. Her plump face was unusually animated.

"I hope you didn't mind because I telephoned the office, Mr. Parker," she began apologetically. "I was so excited, I just did it before I stopped to think."

"Penny and I were nearly ready to start home in any case, Mrs. Weems. Has anything gone wrong here?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Parker. It was the telegram."

"Telegram? One for me, you mean?"



"No, my own." The housekeeper drew a yellow paper from the pocket of her apron, offering it to the publisher. "My Cousin David died out in Montana," she explained. "The funeral was last Saturday."

"That's too bad," remarked Penny sympathetically. And then she added: "Only you don't look particularly sad, Mrs. Weems. How much did he leave you?"

"Penny! You say such shocking things! I never met Cousin David but once in my life. He was a kind, good man and I only wish I had written to him more often. I never dreamed he would remember me in his will."

"Then he did leave you money!" exclaimed Penny triumphantly. "How much does the telegram say, Dad?"

"You may as well tell her, Mr. Parker," sighed the housekeeper. “She'll give me no peace until she learns every detail."

"This message which is from a Montana lawyer mentions six thousand dollars," returned the publisher. "Apparently, the money is to be turned over without legal delay."

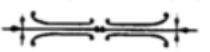
"Why, Mrs. Weems, you're an heiress!" cried Penny admiringly.

"I can't believe it's true," murmured Mrs. Weems. "You don't think there's any mistake, Mr. Parker? It would be too cruel if someone had sent the message as a joke."

Before returning the telegram to the housekeeper, Mr. Parker switched off the radio.

"This message appears to be authentic," he declared. "My congratulations upon your good fortune."

"What will you do with all your money?" inquired Penny.



"Oh, I don't know." The housekeeper sank into a chair, her eyes fastening dreamily on a far wall. "I've always wanted to travel."

Penny and her father exchanged a quick, alarmed glance. Mrs. Weems had been in charge of the household for so many years that they could not imagine living without her, should she decide to leave. During her brief, infrequent vacations, the house always degenerated into a disgrace of dust and misplaced furniture, and meals were never served at regular hours.

"The oceans are very unsafe, Mrs. Weems," discouraged Penny. "Wars and submarines and things. Surely you wouldn't dare travel now."

"Oh, I mean in the United States," replied the housekeeper. "I've always wanted to go out West. They say the Grand Canyon is so pretty it takes your breath away."

"Mrs. Weems, you have worked for us long and faithfully and deserve a rest," said Mr. Parker, trying to speak heartily. "Now if you would enjoy a trip, Penny and I will get along somehow for two or three weeks."

"Oh, if I go, I'll stay the entire summer." The housekeeper hesitated, then added: "I've enjoyed working here, Mr. Parker, but doing the same thing year after year gets tiresome. Often I've said to myself that if I had a little money I would retire and take life easy for the rest of my days."

"Why, Mrs. Weems, you're only forty-eight!" protested Penny. "You would be unhappy if you didn't have any work to do."

"At least, I wouldn't mind trying it."

"Such a change as you contemplate should be considered carefully," contributed Mr. Parker. "While six thousand seems a large sum it would not last long if one had no other income."

Before Mrs. Weems could reply, a strong odor of burning food permeated the room.

"The roast!" exclaimed the housekeeper. "I forgot it!"

Penny rushed ahead of her to the kitchen. As she jerked open the ovendoor, out poured a great cloud of smoke. Seizing a holder, she rescued the meat, and seeing at a glance that it was burned to a crisp,carried the pan outdoors.

"What will the neighbors say?" Mrs. Weems moaned. "I never did a thing like that before. It's just that I am so excited I can't think what I am doing."

"Don't you mind," laughed Penny. "I'll get dinner tonight. You entertain Dad."

With difficulty she persuaded the housekeeper to abandon the kitchen. Left to herself, she opened a can of cold meat, a can of corn, a can of peaches, and with a salad already prepared, speedily announced the meal.

"Mr. Parker, I truly am ashamed--" Mrs. Weems began.

"Now don't apologize for my cooking," broke in Penny. "Quantity before quality is my motto. Anyway, if you are leaving, Dad will have to accustom himself to it."

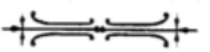
"I'll hide the can opener," said Mr. Parker.

"That's a good idea, Dad."

"Before I go, I'll try to teach Penny a little more about cooking," Mrs. Weems said uncomfortably. "Of course, you'll have no difficulty in getting someone efficient to take my place."

"No one can take your place," declared Penny. "If you leave, Dad and I will go to wrack and ruin."

"You are a pair when you're left to yourselves," Mrs. Weems sighed.



"That's the one thing which makes me hesitate. Penny needs someone to keep her in check."

"An inexperienced person would be putty in my hands," declared Penny. "You may as well decide to stay, Mrs. Weems."

"I don't know what to do. I've planned on this trip for years. Now that it is possible, I feel I can't give it up."

Penny and Mr. Parker regarded each other across the table, and immediately changed the subject. Not until that moment had they actually believed that the housekeeper was serious about leaving Riverview. Somehow they had never contemplated a future without Mrs. Weems.

"I happen to have two complimentary tickets to a show at the Rialto," Mr. Parker said offhand. "I'll be tied up with a meeting tonight, but you folks might enjoy going."

"Shall we, Mrs. Weems?" inquired Penny.

"Thank you," responded the housekeeper, "but I doubt if I could sit still tonight. I thought I would run over to see Mrs. Hodges after dinner. She'll be pleased to learn about my inheritance, I know."

"A friend of yours?" asked Mr. Parker.

"Yes, Penny and I have been acquainted with her for years. She lives on Christopher Street."

"Perhaps this is none of my affair, Mrs. Weems. However, my advice to you
is not to tell many persons about your inheritance."

"Oh, Mrs. Hodges is to be trusted."

"I am sure of it, Mrs. Weems. I refer to strangers."

"I'll be careful," the housekeeper promised. "No one ever will get that
money away from me once I have it!"

Penny helped with the dishes, and then as her father was leaving the
house, asked him if she might have the two theatre tickets.

"Since Mrs. Weems doesn't care to go, I'll invite Louise," she explained.

Mr. Parker gave her the tickets. Making certain that the housekeeper was
upstairs, he spoke in a low tone.

"Penny, Mrs. Weems is serious about leaving us. You must try to dissuade
her."

"What can I do, Dad?"

"Well, you usually have a few ideas in the old filing cabinet. Can't you
think of something?"

"I'll do my best," Penny said with a twinkle. "We can't let an inheritance take Mrs. Weems from us, that's certain."

After her father had gone, Penny telephoned Louise, agreeing to meet her
chum at the entrance of the Rialto. Arriving a few minutes early, she
idly watched various cars unloading their passengers at the theatre.

Presently a long black limousine which Penny recognized drew up at the curb. The chauffeur opened the door. Mr. Kohl and his wife stepped to the pavement. Observing the girl, they paused to chat with her.

"I see you have the new fender installed on your car, Mr. Kohl," Penny remarked with a grin. "May I ask how much I owe the garageman?"

"The sum was trifling," responded the banker. "Twelve dollars and forty cents to be exact. I may as well take care of it myself."

"No, I insist," said Penny, wincing inwardly. "You see, I am one of the Star's- highly paid executives now. I write society in Miss Hilderman's absence and Dad gives me a salary."

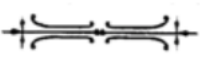
"Oh, really," remarked Mrs. Kohl with interest. "We are giving a dinner for eight tomorrow night. You might like to mention it."

"Indeed, yes," said Penny eagerly.

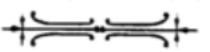
Obtaining complete details, she jotted notes on the back of an envelope. Mrs. Kohl, at Penny's request, was able to recall several important parties which had been held that week, providing material for nearly a half-column of society.

After the Kohls had entered the theatre, Penny turned to glance at the black limousine which was pulling away from the curb. A short distance away stood a young man who likewise appeared to be watching the car. He wore a gray suit and a gray felt hat pulled unnaturally low over his eyes as if to shield his face.

As Penny watched, the young man jotted something down on a piece of paper. His gaze remained fixed upon the Kohl limousine which was moving slowly down the street toward a parking lot.



"Why, that's odd!" thought Penny. "I do believe he noted down the car license number! And perhaps for no good purpose."



CHAPTER 5
THE MAN IN GRAY

Deciding that the matter should be brought to Mr. Kohl's attention, Penny looked quickly into the crowded theatre lobby. The banker and his wife no longer were to be seen.

Turning once more, the girl saw that the young man in gray had also disappeared.

"Now where did he go?" thought Penny. "He must have slipped into the alley. I wish I knew who he was and why he wrote down that car license number."

Curious to learn what had become of the man, she walked to the entrance
of the alley. At its far end she could barely distinguish a shadowy
figure which soon merged into the black of the starless night.

Penny was lost in thought when someone touched her arm. Whirling, she
found herself facing Louise Sidell.

"Oh, hello, Lou," she laughed. "You startled me."

"Sorry to have kept you waiting," apologized Louise. "I missed my bus.
May I ask what you find of such interest in this alley?"

"I was looking for a man. He's disappeared now."

Penny told Louise what she had observed, mentioning that in her opinion the man might be a car thief.

"I've heard that crooks spot cars ahead of time and then steal them," she declared. "I think I should have Mr. Kohl paged in the theatre, and tell him about it."

"You'll make yourself appear ridiculous if you do," Louise discouraged her. "The man may not have taken down the license number at all. Even if he did, his purpose could have been a legitimate one."

"Then why did he slip down the alley?"

"It's merely a short-cut to another street, isn't it? Penny, your imagination simply works at high speed twenty-four hours of the day."

"Oh, all right," said Penny with a shrug. "But if Mr. Kohl's car is stolen, don't blame me."

"It won't be," laughed Louise, linking arms with her chum. "Not with a chauffeur at the wheel."

Entering the theatre, the girls were escorted to their seats only a few minutes before the lights were lowered. Penny glanced over the audience but failed to see either Mr. Kohl or his wife. The curtain went up, and as the entertainment began, she dismissed all else from her mind.

The show ended shortly before eleven and the girls mingled with the crowd which filed from the theatre. Penny watched for Mr. and Mrs. Kohl but did not see them. As she walked with Louise toward the bus stop she spoke of her new duties as society editor of the _Star_.

"Lou," she asked abruptly, "do you mind going home alone?"

"Why, no. Where are you taking yourself?"

"To the _Star_ office, if you don't mind."

"At this time of night?"

"I have a few notes I should type. Unfinished work always makes me nervous."

"You, nervous!" Louise scoffed. "I'll bet you want to see Jerry Livingston!"

"No such thing," denied Penny indignantly. "Jerry doesn't work on the night force unless he's assigned to extra duty."

"Well, you have something besides work on your mind."

"Come along with me, Suspicious, and I'll prove it."

"No, thanks," declined Louise. "It's home and bed for me. You run along."

The girls separated, Penny walking three blocks to the Star building. The advertising office was dark, but blue-white lights glowed weirdly from the composing room. Only a skeleton night staff occupied the newsroom.

Without attracting attention, Penny entered her own office. For an hour she worked steadily, writing copy, and experimenting with various types of make-up to be used on Monday's page.

The door creaked. Glancing up, Penny momentarily was startled to see a large, grotesque shadow of a man moving across the glass panel. However, before she actually could be afraid, Jerry Livingston stepped into the room.

"Oh, it's you!" she laughed in relief. "I thought it was against your principles to work overtime."

The reporter slumped into a chair, and picking up a sheet of copy paper, began to read what Penny had composed.

"I'm not working," he replied absently. "Just killing time." With a yawn
he tossed the paper on the desk again.

"Is my stuff that bad?" inquired Penny.

"Not bad at all. Better than Miss Hilderman writes. But society always
gives me a pain. Not worthy of your talents, Penny."

"I wish you would tell Dad that, Jerry. I'd love to work on a big story
again--one that would rock Riverview on its foundation!"

"I could bear up under a little excitement myself, Penny. Ever since you
broke the Green Door yarn, this sheet has been as dead as an Egyptian
tomb."

"Things may pick up soon."

"Meaning--?"

"Dad is thinking rather seriously of launching a drive against an
organized group of mediums."

"So I hear," nodded Jerry. "You know, for a long while I've thought that
a clever reporter might be able to dig up some evidence at the Celestial
Temple."

"Then you know about the place?"

"I've been there several times."

"What are the meetings like, Jerry?" Penny asked eagerly.

"Similar to a church musical service. At least everything was dignified
when I was there. But I sure had a feeling that the lid was about to blow
off."

"Perhaps you were suspected of being a _Star_ reporter, Jerry."

"Oh, undoubtedly. I could tell that by the way folks stared at me. The only person who would have a chance to get real evidence would be someone unknown as a reporter."

"I wish Dad would let me try it."

"I don't," said Jerry flatly. "The Celestial Temple is no place for a little girl like you."

Penny did not reply as she lowered her typewriter into the cavity of the desk. She was thinking, however, that if Louise could be persuaded to accompany her, she would investigate the Celestial Temple at the first opportunity.

"I'll take you home," Jerry offered as Penny reached for her hat.

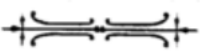
The night was a warm, mellow one in early June, marred only by dark clouds which scudded overhead, threatening rain. Deciding to walk, Penny and Jerry crossed the park to Oakdale Drive where many of Riverview's most expensive homes had been built.

"Doesn't Mr. Kohl live on this street?" Penny presently asked her escort.

"Yes," he answered, "in a large stone apartment building. I'll point it out when we get there."

They walked for a time in silence. Then Penny found herself telling about the afternoon meeting with Mr. Kohl which had led her to Kano's Curio Shop. She spoke, too, of the silken ladder which had so aroused her speculation. Jerry listened with polite interest.

"You and Louise shouldn't have chased around Dorr Street alone," he said severely. "It's a bad district."



"Oh, it was safe enough, Jerry. I'd like to go back there. I can't help being curious about that strange ladder which the old Japanese man was sewing."

"I doubt if there's a story connected with it. The Japanese make any number of curious articles of silk, you know."

"But a ladder, Jerry! What purpose could it serve?"

"For one thing it would be more convenient to carry than the ordinary type."

"One couldn't stand it against a wall or use it in the ordinary way, Jerry. I asked the Japanese about it but he refused to answer."

"He may not have understood you."

"Oh, he understood, all right. Do you know what I think? He was afraid I might discover something which would involve him with the police!"

"Better forget the Kano Curio Shop," Jerry said tolerantly. "I repeat, Dorr Street is no place for you."

"And I'm supposed to forget the Celestial Temple, too," grumbled Penny."Oh, I see you grinned behind your hand! Well, Mr. Livingston, let me tell you--"

She paused, and Jerry's hand tightened on her own. Unmistakably, both had heard a muffled scream. The cry seemed to have come from one of several large brick and stone buildings only a short distance ahead.

"What was that?" Penny asked in a low tone. "Someone calling for help?"

"It sure sounded like it!" exclaimed Jerry. "Come on, Penny! Let's find out what's going on here!"

CHAPTER 6
AN APARTMENT BURGLARY

Together Penny and Jerry ran down the street, their eyes raised to the unevenly lighted windows of the separate apartment houses. They were uncertain as to the building from which the cry had come.

Suddenly the front door of the corner dwelling swung open, and a young woman in a maid's uniform ran toward them.

Jerry, ever alert for a story of interest to the _Star_, neatly blocked the sidewalk. Of necessity the girl halted.

"Get a policeman, quick!" she gasped. "Mr. Kohl's apartment has been robbed!"

"Mr. Kohl--the banker?" demanded Penny, scarcely believing her ears.

"Yes, yes," the maid said in agitation. "Jewels, silverware, everything has been taken! The telephone wire was cut, too! Oh, tell me where I'll find a policeman!"

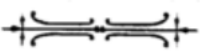
"I'll get one for you," offered Jerry.

The information that it was Mr. Kohl's house which had been burglarized dumbfounded Penny. As the reporter darted away to summon help, she showered questions upon the distraught maid.

"I don't know yet how much has been taken," the girl told her excitedly.

"The rooms look as if a cyclone had swept through them! Oh, what will the Kohls say when they learn about it?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Kohl aren't home yet?"



"No, they went to the theatre. They must have stopped at a restaurant afterwards. When they hear of this, I'll lose my job."

"Perhaps not," said Penny kindly. "Surely you weren't to blame for the burglary."

"They'll think so," the maid responded gloomily.

"I am acquainted with Mr. and Mrs. Kohl. Perhaps, if I speak a good word for you it may help."

"I doubt it," the girl responded. "I was supposed to have stayed at the apartment the entire evening."

"And you didn't?"

"No, I went to a picture show."

"That does throw a different light on the matter," commented Penny.

"I didn't think it would make any difference. I intended to get here
ahead of the Kohls."

"The robbery occurred while you were away?"

"Yes. As soon as I opened the door I knew what had happened! Oh, I'll lose my job all right unless I can think up a good story."

"I wouldn't lie if I were you," advised Penny. "The police are certain to break down your story. In any case, you owe it to yourself and your employers to tell the truth."

A misty rain had started to fall. The maid, who was without a wrap, shivered, yet made no move to re-enter the building. Overhead, all along the dark expanse of apartment wall, lights were being turned on.

"I am afraid your scream aroused nearly everyone in the building," said Penny. "If I were in your place I would return to the Kohl apartment and not answer many questions until the police arrive."

"Will you stay with me?"

"Gladly."

The apartment door had slammed shut and locked with the night latch. Fortunately the maid had a key with her so it was not necessary to ring for the janitor. Ignoring the persons who had gathered in the hall, they took an automatic lift to the third floor, letting themselves into the Kohl suite.

"This is the way I found it," said the maid.

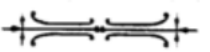
She switched on a light, revealing a living room entirely bare of rugs. Where three small Oriental rugs had been placed, only rectangular rims of dirt remained to mark their outlines.

Beyond, in the dining room with its massive carved furniture, the contents of a buffet had been emptied on the floor. Several pieces of china lay in fragments. A corner cupboard had been stripped, save for a vase and an ebony elephant with a broken tusk.

"The wall cabinet was filled with rare antiques," disclosed the maid.
"Mrs. Kohl has collected Early American silver for many years. Some of the pieces she considered priceless."

The bedrooms were in less disorder. However, bureau drawers had been overturned, and jewel cases looted of everything save the most trivial
articles.

"Mrs. Kohl's pearls are gone, and her diamond bracelet," the maid informed, picking up the empty jewel box. "I am pretty sure she didn’t wear them to the theatre."



"I wouldn't touch anything if I were you," advised Penny. "Fingerprints."

The maid dropped the case. "Oh!" she gasped. "I never thought of that! Do you think the police will blame me for the robbery?"

"Not if you tell them the truth. It surely will be unwise to try to hide anything."

"I won't hold anything back," the maid promised. "It happened just like I said. After Mr. and Mrs. Kohl left I went to a picture show."

"Alone?"

"With my girl friend. After the show we had a soda together, and then she went home."

"What time did you get here?"

"Only a minute or two before I called for help. I tried the telephone first."

"Why didn't you summon the janitor?"

"I never thought of that. I was so excited I ran outside hoping to find a policeman."

Penny nodded and, returning to the living room, satisfied herself that the telephone wires actually had been cut.

"You didn't notice anyone in the halls as you went downstairs."

"No one. Old Mr. Veely was on the lower floor when I came from the show, but he's lived here for seven years. I don't see how the burglar got into the apartment."

"I was wondering about that myself. You're quite sure you locked thesuite door?"

"Oh, yes, I know I did," the maid said emphatically. "And it isn't possible to get into the building without a key. Otherwise, the janitor must be called."

Penny walked thoughtfully to the living room window. The apartment stood fully thirty-five feet from a neighboring building, with the space between much too wide to be spanned. Below, the alley was deserted, and no fire escape ascended from it.

"The burglar couldn't have entered that way," declared the maid. "He must have had his own key."

Before Penny could respond, a sharp knock sounded on the door. The servant girl turned to open it. However, instead of the anticipated police, the apartment janitor, George Bailey, peered into the disordered room.

"I heard someone scream a minute or so ago," he said. "Some of the tenants thought it came from this apartment. Maybe they were mistaken."

"There's no mistake," spoke Penny from across the room. "The Kohls have been robbed. Will you please come inside and close the door?"

"Robbed! You don't say!" The janitor stared with alarmed interest. "When did it happen?"

Penny allowed the maid to tell what had occurred, adding no information of her own. When there came a lull in the excited flow of words, she said quietly:

"Mr. Bailey, do you mind answering a few questions?"

"Why should I?" the janitor countered. "I'll tell you right now I know nothing about this. I've attended strictly to my duties. It's not my lookout if tenants leave their suite doors unlocked."

"No one is blaming you," Penny assured him. "I merely thought you might contribute to a solution of the burglary."

"I don't know a thing about it."

"You didn't let anyone into the apartment building tonight?"

"Not a soul. I locked the service door at six o'clock, too. Now let me ask this: Who are you, and how did you get in here?"

"That's fair enough," smiled Penny. She told her name, explained that she was an acquaintance of the Kohls, and had been summoned by the maid.

"Please don't think that I am trying to play detective," she added. “I ask these questions in the hope of gaining information for my father’s paper, the _Star_."

"Well, it looks to me as if it was an inside job," the janitor replied, mollified. "Come to think of it though, I've seen a suspicious-acting fellow hanging around the building."

"You mean tonight?"

"No, several days ago. He stayed on the other side of the street and kept watching the doorway."

"What did he look like, Mr. Bailey?"

"Oh, I don't remember. He was just an average young man in a gray overcoat and hat."

"Gray?" repeated Penny alertly.

"It may have been light blue. I didn't pay much attention. At the time I sized up the fellow as a detective."

Penny had no opportunity to ask additional questions for just then voices were heard in the hallway. As she opened the door, Jerry Livingston, followed by a policeman, came toward her.

"Learn anything?" the reporter asked softly in her ear.

"A little," answered Penny. "Let's see how much the officer turns up before I go into my song and dance."

Making a routine inspection of the rooms, the police questioned both the maid and the janitor. From an elderly lady who occupied the adjoining suite he gleaned information that the Kohls' telephone had rung steadily for fifteen minutes during the early evening hours.

"What time was that?" interposed Penny.

The policeman gazed at her with sharp disapproval. "Please," he requested with exaggerated politeness.

"Sorry," apologized Penny, fading into the background.

"It rang about eight o'clock," the old lady revealed.

"The information is not significant," said the officer, glancing again at Penny.

She started to speak, then bit her lip, remaining silent.

"Well, sister, what's on your mind?" he demanded abruptly.

"Excuse me, officer, but I think the information does have importance. Couldn't it mean that the crooks, whoever they were, telephoned the apartment to make certain it was deserted before breaking in?"

"Possibly," conceded the policeman. His frown discouraged her. "Any other theories?"

"No," said Penny shortly.

The policeman began to herd the tenants into the hall. For a moment he paid no attention to Penny and Jerry, who with the maid were permitted to remain.

"Never try to show up a policeman, even if he is a stuffed shirt," remarked the reporter softly. "It gets you nowhere."

The door closed and the officer faced the pair.

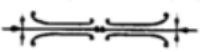
"Now young lady," he said, quite pleasantly. "What do you know about this burglary? I'll be very glad to listen."

"I don't really know a thing," admitted Penny. "But here's a little clue which you may be able to interpret. I can't."

Leading the policeman to the window, she started to raise the sash. The officer stopped her, performing the act himself, his hand protected by a handkerchief.

"There is your clue," said Penny.

She indicated two freshly made gashes on the window ledge. Separated by possibly a foot of space, they clearly had been made by a hook or sharp instrument which had dug deeply into the wood.



CHAPTER 7
MARK OF THE IRON HOOK

"What do you think of it?" Penny asked as the officer studied the marks in silence.

"I'd say they were made by something which hooked over the ledge," the policeman replied. "Possibly a ladder with curving irons."

Jerry gazed down over the window ledge into the dark alley.

"No ordinary ladder could reach this high," he commented. "Raising an extension would be quite a problem, too."

The Kohl maid timidly approached the window, gazing at the two deep gashes with interest. Asked by the policeman if she ever had noticed them before, she shook her head.

"Oh, no, sir. They must have been made tonight. I know they weren't there this afternoon when I dusted the window sills."

"Incredible as it seems, the thief came through this window," decided the policeman. "How he did it is for the detectives at Central Station to figure out."

Explaining that the rooms must not be disturbed until Identification Bureau men had made complete fingerprint records, the officer locked Penny, Jerry and the maid outside the suite. He then went to a nearby apartment to telephone his report.

"Maybe this is an ordinary burglary, but it doesn't look that way to me," remarked Jerry as he and Penny went down the stairway.

"In any case, the story should be front page copy. Anything the Kohls do is news in Riverview."

"How high would you estimate the loss?"

"Oh, I couldn't guess, Jerry. Thousands of dollars."

Passing groups of tenants who cluttered the hallway excitedly discussing the burglary, they evaded questioners and reached the street.

"Jerry," said Penny suddenly, "I didn't mention this to the policeman because he seemed to resent my opinions. But it occurred to me that I may have seen the man who robbed the Kohls--or at least had something to do with it."

"How could you have seen him, Penny? We were together when the Kohl maid yelled for help."

"Earlier than that. It was while I was at the theatre."

Half expecting that Jerry would laugh, Penny told how she had observed the man in gray note down the license number of the Kohl limousine.

"It came to me like a flash! That fellow may have telephoned the Kohl apartment after seeing the car at the theatre. Making sure no one was at home, he then looted the place at his leisure."

"Wait a minute," interrupted Jerry. "The Motor Vehicle Department closes at six o'clock. How could your man have obtained Kohl's name and address from the license number?"

"I never thought about the department being closed," confessed Penny. "How you do love to shoot shrapnel into my little ideas!"

"At least you have original theories, which is more than I do," comforted Jerry. "Before we leave, shall we take a look at the alley?"

Penny brightened instantly and accompanied the reporter to the rear of the building. The alley was deserted. Without a light they were unable to examine the ground beneath the Kohl's apartment window.

Suddenly, both straightened as they heard a sound behind them. The brilliant beam of a flashlight focused on their faces, blinding them.

"Oh, it's you again," said a gruff voice.

The beam was lowered, and behind it they saw the policeman.

"You young cubs are a pest," he said irritably.

Ignoring them, he moved his light over the ground. There were no footprints or other marks visible beneath the window.

"If a ladder had stood here it would show," remarked Jerry. "The thief must have used some other means of getting into the building."

While the policeman was inspecting the ground, the janitor stepped from a rear basement door, joining the group.

"Officer, I have some more information for you," he volunteered.

"What is it?"

"I was talking with my wife. She says that about two hours ago she noticed a man walking through the alley. He carried a suitcase, and kept looking at the upstairs windows."

"No ladder?"

"Only a suitcase."

"I'll have the detectives talk with your wife," the policeman promised.

"They'll be here any minute now."

Penny and Jerry lingered until the two men arrived, bringing a photographer with them. No new evidence being made available, it seemed a waste of time to remain longer.

"Don't bother to take me home," Penny insisted. "Dash straight to the office and write your story. The other papers won't have a word about the robbery until the police report is made."

"I don't like to abandon you."

"Don't be silly, Jerry. It's only a few blocks farther."

Thus urged, the reporter bade Penny good-bye. As she hastened on alone, it began to rain and the air turned colder. To save her clothing, she ran the last block, reaching the porch quite breathless.

The house was dark, the front door locked. Penny let herself in with a key, switched on the lights, and after getting a snack from the refrigerator, started upstairs.

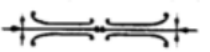
From her father's room issued loud snores. However, Mrs. Weems' door stood open, and as Penny glanced in she was surprised to see that the bed had not been disturbed.

"Mrs. Weems must still be at the Hodges'," she thought.

"Perhaps I should go after her. She'll have a long walk in this rain."

Penny went to a window and looked out. The downpour showed no sighs of slackening. With a sigh she found her raincoat and started for the garage.

During her absence, Mr. Parker had towed Leaping Lena to a vacant lot adjoining the property. The maroon car awaited



her beneath shelter, and she drove it through dark streets to the Hodges' modest home.

Lights glowed cheerily from the lower floor windows. In response to Penny's knock, a bent old man, his hands gnarled by hard labor, opened the door.

"Is it Penelope?" he asked, squinting at her through the rain. "Come in! Come in!"

"Good evening, Mr. Hodges. Is Mrs. Weems still here?"

"Yes, I am, Penny," called the housekeeper. "Goodness, what time is it anyway?"

"Nearly midnight."

Penny shook water from her coat and stepped into the spic and span living room. An unshaded electric light disclosed a rug too bright, wallpaper too glaring, furniture stiff and old fashioned. Yet one felt at once welcome, for the seamstress and her husband were simple, friendly people.

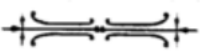
"Have a chair, Penelope," invited Mrs. Hodges. She was short like her husband, with graying hair and an untroubled countenance.

"Thank you, but I can't stay," replied Penny. "I came to drive Mrs. Weems home."

"I had no idea it was so late," the housekeeper said, getting to her feet. "Mrs. Hodges and I have been planning my traveling outfit."

"I'll try to have the dresses for you within the next two weeks," promised the seamstress. "Your good fortune makes me very happy, Maud. Isn't the news of her inheritance wonderful, Penelope?"

"Oh, yes, yes, of course," stammered Penny. "Only I hope Mrs. Weems isn't



leaving us within two weeks. What's this about a traveling outfit?"

"I've always wanted fine clothing," said Mrs. Weems dreamily. “Mrs. Hodges is making me a suit, three silk dresses, a tissue velvet evening gown--"

"An evening gown!" Penny gasped. "Where will you wear it?"

"I'll find places."

"Maybe she aims to catch a husband while she's galavantin' around out there in Californy," contributed Mr. Hodges with a sly wink.

"The very idea!" laughed Mrs. Weems, yet with no displeasure.

Penny sagged into the nearest rocking chair. The conversation was paced too fast for her.

"Evening gowns--husbands--California," she murmured weakly. "Wait until Dad hears about this."

"Mr. Hodges was only joking," declared Mrs. Weems, reaching for her hat. "I wouldn't marry the best man on earth. But I definitely am going west this summer."

"I envy you, Maud," said the seamstress, her eyes shining. "Pa and I want to go out there and buy a little orange grove someday. But with taxes what they are, we can't seem to save a penny."

Mrs. Weems squeezed her friend's hand.

"I wish I could take you along, Jenny," she said. "All these years you’ve sewed your poor fingers almost to the bone. You deserve an easier life."

"Oh, Pa and I don't complain," the seamstress answered brightly. “And things are going to look up."

"Sure they are," agreed Mr. Hodges. "I'll get a job any day now."

Penny, who was watching the seamstress' face was amazed to see it suddenly transformed. Losing her usual calm, Mrs. Hodges exclaimed:

"Pa! It just this minute came to me! Maud getting her inheritance is another psychic sign!"

Penny rocked violently and even Mrs. Weems looked startled.

"I don't know what you mean, Jenny," she said.

"We said we wouldn't tell anybody, Ma," protested Mr. Hodges mildly.

"Mrs. Weems is my best friend, and Penelope won't tell. Will you, Penelope?"

"Not what I don't know," replied Penny in bewilderment. "How can Mrs. Weems' inheritance have anything to do with a psychic sign?"

"You may as well tell 'em," grinned Mr. Hodges, "If you keep the news much longer you'll bust."

"The strangest thing happened three nights ago," Mrs. Hodges began, her voice quivering with excitement. "But wait! First I'll show you the letter!”

CHAPTER 8

PSYCHIC SIGNS

As Penny and Mrs. Weems waited, the seamstress went to another room, returning with a stamped, slit envelope.

"Notice the postmark," she requested, thrusting the letter into Penny's hand.

"It was mailed from New York," the girl observed.

"I mean the hour at which the envelope was stamped by the postmaster."

"I make it 11:30 P.M. June fifteenth," Penny read aloud. "Does the time and date have special significance?"

"Indeed, it does," the seamstress replied impressively. "You tell them, Pa."

"It happened three nights ago," began Mr. Hodges. "Ma worked late stitchin' up some playsuits for Mrs. Hudson's little girl. Afterwards we had bread and milk like we always do, and then we went to bed."

"At the time, I said to Pa that something queer was going to happen," broke in the seamstress. "I could feel it in my bones. It was as if something was hovering over us."

"A feeling of impending trouble?" questioned Penny.

"Nothing like that," said Mr. Hodges.

"No, it was as if one almost could feel a foreign presence in the room," Mrs. Hodges declared, lowering her voice. "A supernatural being."

"Surely you don't believe in ghosts...?" Penny began, but the seamstress did not hear. Unheeding, she resumed:

"Pa rubbed my back to ease the pain I get from working too long at the machine. Then we went to bed. Neither of us had gone to sleep when suddenly we heard it!"

"Six sharp raps on the outside bedroom wall," supplied Mr. Hodges. “It was like this." He demonstrated on the table.

"We both heard it," added Mrs. Hodges. "It scared me nearly out of my wits."

"Possibly it was someone at the door," suggested Penny.

"No, it wasn't that. Pa got up and went to see."

"Could it have been a tree bough brushing against the wall?"

"It wasn't that," said Mr. Hodges. "The maple is too far off to strike our bedroom."

"There's only one explanation," declared the seamstress with conviction. "It was a psychic sign--the first."

"I don't believe in such things myself," announced Penny. "Surely there must be another explanation."

"That's what I told Jenny," nodded Mr. Hodges. "But since the letter came, doggoned if I don't think maybe she's right."

"What has the letter to do with it?" inquired Mrs. Weems.

The seamstress pointed to the postmark on the envelope.

"The hour at which we heard the strange tappings was eleven-thirty! Pa looked at the clock. And it was three days ago, June fifteenth."

"Corresponding to the marking on this envelope," commented Penny. “That is a coincidence."

Mrs. Hodges shook her head impatiently.

"You surely don't think it just happened by _accident_?" she asked. “It must have been intended as a sign--an omen."

"What did the letter say?" Penny inquired, without answering Mrs. Hodges’ question. She knew that her true opinion would not please the woman.

"It wasn't rightly a letter," the seamstress returned. "The envelope contained six silver dollars fitted into a stiff piece of cardboard."

"We figured it was another sign," contributed Mr. Hodges. "Six raps on the wall--six dollars."

"I wish some ghost would come and pound all night long on my bedroom door," remarked Penny lightly.

"Penelope, you shouldn't speak so disrespectfully," Mrs. Weems reproved in a mild voice.

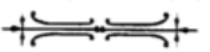
"Excuse me, I didn't mean to," said Penny, composing her face. "What else has happened of a supernatural nature?"

"Why, nothing yet," Mrs. Hodges admitted. "But Pa and I have had a feeling as if something important were about to take place. And now Maud inherits six thousand dollars!"

"There was nothing psychic about that," said Mrs. Weems. "Cousin David had no close relatives so he left the money to me."

The seamstress shook her head, and an ethereal light shone in her eyes.

"Night before last when I went to bed I was thinking that I wished with all my heart something nice would happen to you, Maud. Now it's come to pass!"



Even Mrs. Weems was somewhat startled by the seamstress' calm assumption that her thoughts had been responsible for the inheritance.

"Don't you see," Mrs. Hodges resumed patiently. "It must mean that I have great psychic powers. I confess I am rather frightened."

Penny arose and began to button her raincoat.

"Excuse me for saying it," she remarked, "but if I were you, Mrs. Hodges, I'd spend the six dollars and forget the entire affair. Someone must have played a joke on you!"

"A joke!" The seamstress was offended. "People don't give away money as a joke."

"No, these days they squeeze the eagles until they holler," chuckled Mr. Hodges.

"The letter was postmarked New York City," went on his wife. "We don't know a soul there. Oh, no one ever can make me believe that it was done as a joke. The letter was mailed at exactly the hour we heard the six raps!"

"And there wasn't a sign of anyone near the house," added Mr. Hodges.

"Well, at least you're six dollars ahead," said Penny. "Shall we go, Mrs. Weems? It's after midnight."

The seamstress walked to the door with the callers.

"I'll get busy tomorrow on those new dresses," she promised Mrs. Weems. "Drop in again whenever you can. And you, too, Penelope."

Driving home through the rain, Penny stole a quick glance at the housekeeper who seemed unusually quiet.

"Do you suppose Jenny could be right?" Mrs. Weems presently ventured. "I mean about Cousin David and the

inheritance?" "Of course not!" laughed Penny. "Why, your cousin died a long while
before Mrs. Hodges discovered that she was psychic. It's all the bunk!"

"I wish I really knew."

"Why, Mrs. Weems!" Penny prepared to launch into a violent argument. “I never heard of such nonsense! How could Mrs. Hodges have psychic powers? Everyone realizes that communication with the spirit world is
impossible!"

"You are entitled to your opinion, Penny, but others may differ with you. Who can know about The Life Beyond? Isn't it in the realm of possibility that Mrs. Hodges may have had a message from Cousin David?"

"She didn't speak of it."

"Not in words, Penny. But those strange rappings, the arrival of the letter--it was all very strange and unexplainable."

"I'll admit it was queer, Mrs. Weems. However, I'll never agree that there's anything supernatural connected with it."

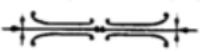
"You close your mind to things you do not wish to believe," the housekeeper reproved. "What can any of us know of the spirit world?"

Penny gazed at Mrs. Weems in alarm. She realized that the seamstress’ story had deeply impressed her.

"I'll stake my knowledge against Mrs. Hodges' any old day," she declared lightly. "I met one ghost-maker--Osandra--remember him?"

"Why remind me of that man, Penny?" asked the housekeeper wearily.

"Because you once paid him good money for the privilege of attending his seances. You were convinced he was in



communication with the world beyond. He proved to be an outrageous fraud."

"I was taken in by him as were many other persons," Mrs. Weems acknowledged. "Mrs. Hodges' case is different. We have been friends for ten years. She would not misrepresent the facts."

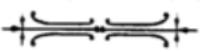
"No, Mrs. Hodges is honest. I believe that the money was sent to her. But not by a ghost!"

"Let's not discuss it," said Mrs. Weems with finality. "I never did enjoy an argument."

Penny lapsed into silence and a moment later the car swung into the Parker driveway. The housekeeper hurried into the house, leaving the girl to close the garage doors.

Penny snapped the padlock shut. Unmindful of the rain, she stood for a moment, staring into the night. Nothing had gone exactly right that day, and her disagreement with Mrs. Weems, minor though it was, bothered her.

"There's more to this psychic business than appears on the surface," she thought grimly. "A great deal more! Maybe I am stubborn and opinionated. But I know one thing! No trickster is going to take advantage of the
Hodges or of Mrs. Weems either--not if I can prevent it."



CHAPTER 9
MRS. WEEMS' INHERITANCE

The clock chimed seven-thirty the next morning as Penny came downstairs.

She dropped a kiss on her father's forehead and slid into a chair at the opposite side of the breakfast table.

"Good morning, Daddykins," she greeted him cheerfully. "Any news in the old scandal sheet?"

Mr. Parker lowered the newspaper.

"Please don't call me Daddykins," he requested. "You know I hate it. Here's something which may interest you. Your friends the Kohls were robbed last night."

"You're eight hours late," grinned Penny, reaching for the front page. “I was there."

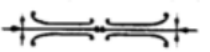
"I suppose you lifted the pearls and the diamond bracelet on your way to the theatre."

"No," said Penny, rapidly scanning the story which Jerry had written, "but I think I may have seen the man who did do it."

She then told her father of having observed a stranger note the license number of the Kohl car, and mentioned the events which had followed.

"You may have been mistaken about what the man wrote down," commented her father.

"That's possible, but he was staring straight at the car."



"I doubt if the incident had any connection with the burglary, Penny. With the Motor Vehicle Department closed, he would have had no means of quickly learning who the Kohls were or where they lived."

"Couldn't he have recognized them?"

"In that case he would have no need for the license number. You didn't see the man note down the plates of other cars?"

"No, but he may have done it before I noticed him standing by the theatre."

Turning idly through the morning paper, Penny's attention was drawn to another news story. Reading it rapidly, she thrust the page into her father's hand.

"Dad, look at this! There were two other burglaries last night! Apartment houses on Drexel Boulevard and Fenmore Street were entered."

"H-m, interesting. The Kohls occupy an apartment also. That rather suggests that the same thief ransacked the three places."

"And it says here that the families were away for the evening!" Penny resumed with increasing excitement. "I'll bet a cent they were at the theatre! Oh, Dad, that man in gray must have been the one who did it!"

"If all the persons you suspect of crime were arrested, our jails couldn't hold them," remarked Mr. Parker calmly. "Eat your breakfast, Penny, before it gets cold."

Mrs. Weems entered through the kitchen door, bearing reenforcements of hot waffles and crisp bacon. Her appearance reminded Penny to launch into a highly entertaining account of all that had transpired at the Hodges' the previous night.

"Penny!" protested the housekeeper. "You promised Mrs. Hodges to say nothing about the letter."

"Oh, no, I didn't promise," corrected Penny. "I was careful to say that I couldn't tell what I didn't know. Years ago Dad taught me that a good reporter never agrees to accept a confidence. Isn't that so, Dad?"

"A wise reporter never ties his own hands," replied Mr. Parker. "If he promises, and then obtains the same story from another source, he's morally bound not to use it. His paper may be scooped by the opposition."

"You two are a pair," sighed Mrs. Weems. "Scoops and front page stories are all either of you think about. I declare, it distresses me to realize how Penny may be trained after I leave."

"The way to solve that problem is not to leave," said Penny. "You know we can't get along without you."

Mrs. Weems shook her head.

"It cuts me almost in two to leave," she declared sadly, "but my mind's made up. Mrs. Hodges says I am doing the right thing."

"And I suppose a ghost advised her," muttered Penny.

Mr. Parker glanced sternly at his daughter and she subsided into silence. But not for long. Soon she was trying to reopen the subject of the mysterious letter received by the Hodges. For a reason she could not understand, her father was loath to discuss it.

"Come, Penny," he said. "If we're having that game of tennis this morning, it's time we start."

En route to the park, the publisher explained why he had not chosen to express an opinion in the housekeeper's presence.

"I quite agree with you that Mrs. Hodges has no psychic powers, Penny.

She's been the victim of a hoax. However, Mrs. Weems is intensely loyal to her friend, and any disparaging remarks made by us will only serve to antagonize her."

"I'll try to be more careful, Dad. But it's so silly!"

Monday morning found Penny busy once more with her duties at the society desk. No new information had developed regarding the Kohl burglary, and she did not have time to accompany Mrs. Weems who went frequently to the Hodges' cottage.

Secretly Penny held an opinion that the housekeeper's inheritance might be the work of a prankster. Therefore, upon returning from the office one afternoon and learning that the money actually had been delivered, she was very glad she had kept her thoughts to herself.

"The lawyer came this morning and had me sign a paper," Mrs. Weems revealed to the Parkers. "Then he turned the money over to me—six thousand dollars."

"I hope the cheque is good," remarked Penny.

"It was. I had the lawyer accompany me to the bank. They gave me the money without asking a single question. I have it here."

"You have six thousand dollars cash in the house!"

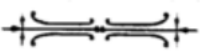
"Yes, I had the cashier give it to me in hundred dollar bills."

"Do you consider it safe to keep such a large sum?" Mr. Parker inquired mildly. "I should advise returning it to the bank, or better still, why not invest it in sound securities?"

Mrs. Weems shook her head. "It gives me a nice rich feeling to have the cash. I've hidden it in a good place."

"Where?" demanded Penny.

"I won't tell," laughed Mrs. Weems.



Again later in the evening, Mr. Parker tried without success to convince the housekeeper that she should return the money to a bank. Never one to force his opinions upon another, he then dropped the subject.

"When will you be leaving us, Mrs. Weems?" he inquired.

"Whenever you can spare me. Now that I have the money, I should like to leave within ten days or two weeks."

"Since we can't persuade you to remain, I'll try to find someone to take your place," Mr. Parker promised.

Both he and Penny were gloomy at the prospect of replacing the housekeeper. Not only would they miss Mrs. Weems but they honestly believed that she would never be happy without twoincorrigibles and a home to manage.

"Dad," Penny ventured when they were alone, "just supposing that Mrs. Weems' money should mysteriously disappear--"

"Don't allow your mind to dwell on that idea," cut in her father sternly. "We'll play fair."

"Oh, I wouldn't do it," said Penny hastily. "I was only joking. But if something _should_ happen to the money, it would solve all our problems."

"Mrs. Weems has earned her vacation. Even though it will be hard to lose her, we mustn't stand in her way."

"I guess you're right," sighed Penny.

The following day Miss Hilderman resumed her duties at the _Star_, and Penny once more found herself a person of leisure. To her annoyance, Mrs. Weems insisted that she spend many hours in the kitchen, learning how to bake pies and cakes. A particularly distasteful lesson came to an end

only when Penny, with brilliant inspiration, remembered that the housekeeper had an appointment with the seamstress.

"Dear me, I had forgotten it!" exclaimed Mrs. Weems. "Yes, I must try on my new dresses!"

"I'll drive you over," offered Penny.

Not in recent days had the girl called upon the Hodges. As she and Mrs. Weems alighted from the car, they both noticed freshly ironed curtains at the windows. Mr. Hodges was pounding dust from a carpet on the line.

"Housecleaning?" inquired Penny, pausing to chat with the old man.

"Yes, Jenny's got me hard at it," he grinned. "She's been tearin' the house upside down gettin' ready for the new roomer."

"Oh, have you taken one?"

Penny was surprised, knowing that in past years the Hodges had been too proud to rent rooms.

"There's a young feller moving in today," Mr. Hodges said, picking up the carpet beater. "Go on inside. Jenny'll tell you about it."

Penny and Mrs. Weems entered the cottage where the seamstress was running a dust mop over the floors. She was somewhat dismayed to see the housekeeper.

"Oh, Maud, I've been so busy I didn't get your dresses ready to be tried on."

"It doesn't matter," replied Mrs. Weems. "What's this about a new roomer?"

"I always said I wouldn't have one cluttering up the place. But this young man is different. His coming here--well, I interpret it as another
sign."

"A sign of what?" inquired Penny with her usual directness.

"Well, it seemed as if I had a direct message from the spirit world to take him into our home. He came here last night. Instead of knocking in the usual way, he rapped six times in succession!"

"Probably he was the one who sent the letter," said Penny alertly.

"Oh, no! He didn't know anything about it. I asked him."

"What is his name, Mrs. Hodges?"

"Al Gepper. He's such a nice young man and he talks so refined. I am letting him have the entire floor upstairs."

"That should bring you a nice income," remarked Mrs. Weems.

"I am asking only two dollars a week," admitted the seamstress. "He said he couldn't pay more than that."

"Why, Jenny," protested Mrs. Weems, "such a small amount hardly will cover the lights and various extras."

"I know, Maud, but I couldn't turn him away. He moved his apparatus in last night and will bring his personal belongings sometime today."

"His apparatus?" echoed Penny. "What is he, a chemist?"

"No," replied the seamstress, smiling mysteriously. "I'll show you the rooms."

Penny and Mrs. Weems followed the woman upstairs. The upper floor was divided into two small bedrooms with a

wide, old-fashioned sliding door between which could be opened to make one large chamber. The larger of
the rooms had been cleared of its usual furniture. Where a bed previously had stood was a circular table with six or eight chairs, and behind it a tall cabinet with a black curtain across the front.

"Mr. Gepper plans to use this room for his studio," explained Mrs. Hodges.

Penny's gaze had fastened upon the cabinet. She crossed to it and pulled aside the curtain. Inside were several unpacked boxes and a suitcase.

"Mrs. Hodges, to what purpose does your young man expect to put this studio?" she asked.

"I don't know. He didn't tell me. But I think he intends to carry on
psychic experiments. He's a student, he said."
"Mr. Gepper was afraid to tell you the truth lest you refuse to rent the rooms," declared Penny. "Mrs. Hodges, your roomer is a medium."

"Why do you think so?"

"Because I've seen trappings such as these before at other seance chambers," replied Penny. "Mrs. Hodges, you must send him away before he involves you with the police."

CHAPTER 10
OUIJA BOARD WISDOM

"Trouble with the police!" Mrs. Hodges echoed, regarding Penny with unconcealed dismay. "How can it be illegal to rent Mr. Gepper these rooms?"

"Renting the rooms isn't illegal," Penny corrected. "But if the young man conducts public seances here--filches money from people--then you may be considered a party to the scheme. This city has a local ordinance prohibiting fortune telling, mind reading and the like."

"I am sure the young man means no wrong."

"Penny," commented Mrs. Weems, "it seems to me that you are overly
concerned. Why are you convinced that Mr. Gepper is a medium?"

"Doesn't this cabinet indicate it?"

"I thought it was some sort of wardrobe closet," Mrs. Hodges admitted.

"Al Gepper is a medium, or pretends to have spiritualistic powers," Penny repeated. "In my opinion you'll be very unwise to allow him to start an illegal business here."

"Oh, dear, I don't know what to do now," declared the seamstress. “I'll have to ask Pa about it."

She and Mrs. Weems started downstairs, expecting that Penny would follow.

Instead, the girl lingered to inspect the cabinet.

On the lower floor a door slammed, and there were footsteps ascending the stairway. She paid no heed, assuming that it was either Mr. Hodges or his wife who approached.

The door swung open. Turning, Penny saw a young man, possibly thirty years of age, standing on the threshold. His dark eyes were sharp and appraising.

"Hello," he said, without smiling. "Aren't you afraid a monkey may jump out of that cabinet?"

Penny, who seldom blushed, felt a wave of heat creeping over her cheeks.

"Hello," she stammered. "You must be Mrs. Hodges' new roomer."

"Al Gepper, at your service. Who are you, girlie?"

"You guessed it," said Penny shortly, edging away from the cabinet.

Al Gepper remained in the doorway, blocking the exit with his arm. He did not move as the girl attempted to move past him.

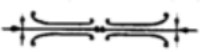
"What's your hurry?" he drawled. "Stick around and let's get acquainted. I'll show you some neat card tricks."

"Thanks, but I haven't time, Mr. Gepper."

"What's your name anyhow?" he persisted. "You're not Mrs. Hodges' daughter."

"No, only a friend."

"You needn't be so icy about it," he rebuked. "Any friend of Mrs. Hodges' is a friend of mine."



"I never make friends easily," Penny replied. "For that matter, I don't mind telling you that I have advised Mrs. Hodges not to rent you these rooms."

"Oh, you have?" inquired the man, his eyes hardening. "And what business is it of yours?"

"None, perhaps. I merely am not going to allow her to be taken in if I can prevent it!"

"Oh, indeed. Do you mind explaining?"

"It's perfectly obvious that you're one of these fake spiritualists," Penny accused bluntly. "Your nickname should be Six-Raps Al!"

"A little spit-fire, aren't you?" the man retorted. "But you have style. Now I may be able to use you in my business."

"You admit that you're a medium?"

"I am a spiritualist. Not a fake, as you so crudely accuse. And I assure you I have no intention of deceiving or taking advantage of your dear friends, the Hodges."

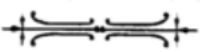
"You expect to use these rooms for public seances?"

"I do."

"Then you are certain to get the Hodges into trouble with the police."

"Not unless you start squawking." Al Gepper's manner changed abruptly. He grasped Penny's wrist and pushed a leering face close to hers. "I'm not looking for any trouble from you or anyone else--see! If you try to make it, you'll wake up with a headache!"

Penny jerked free and, shouldering through the door, raced downstairs.



Glancing back, she saw that Al Gepper was following, though at a more leisurely pace. Instantly she divined that he intended to make sure no report of the incident was given to the Hodges, save in his presence.

Mrs. Weems and the old couple were talking in the kitchen.

"Well, Ma, it's for you to decide," Mr. Hodges was saying. "We gave our word to the young feller, and it's kinda mean to turn him out so sudden like."

"I regret Penny said anything about the matter." apologized Mrs. Weems. "You know how out-spoken and impulsive she is. Of course, she has no information about Mr. Gepper."

"Oh, but I do have information," spoke Penny from the doorway. “Mr. Gepper has just admitted that he intends to use the room for public seances. Isn't that true?"

Defiantly, she turned to face the young man who had followed her.

"Quite true," he acknowledged loftily. "One who has a great psychic gift is duty-bound to allow the world to benefit from one's talents. The selection of this house as a Temple for Celestial Communication was not mine, but the bidding of the Spirits. In a dream I was instructed to come here and take up residence."

"What night did you have the dream?" questioned Mrs. Hodges, deeply impressed.

"It was June fifteenth."

"The very night we heard the strange rappings on our bedroom wall, Pa."

"Dogonned if it wasn't!"

"Mr. Gepper, do you truly believe it is possible to communicate with the spiritual world?" Mrs. Weems inquired politely.

"My dear madam, I can best answer by offering a demonstration. Have you a ouija board in the house?"

"Yes, we have," spoke Mrs. Hodges eagerly. "Pa and I got it from a mail order house years ago, but it never worked for us. You fetch it, Pa."

Mr. Hodges brought a large, flat board which bore letters and figures. Upon it he placed a small, triangular piece with cushioned legs.

"This do-dad is supposed to spell out messages, ain't it?" he asked. “Ma and I could never make it work right."

Al Gepper smiled in a superior way, and placing the board on his lap, motioned for Mrs. Weems to sit opposite him. However, before the housekeeper could obey, Penny slid into the vacant chair. The medium frowned.

"Place your hands lightly on the triangular piece," he instructed. "Concentrate with me as we await a message from the spiritual world."

Penny fastened her eyes on the distant wall with a blank stare.

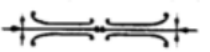
A minute passed. The ouija board made several convulsive struggles, but seemed unable to move.

"The Spirits encounter resistance," the medium said testily. "They can send no message when one's attitude is antagonistic."

"Shall I take off the brakes?" asked Penny.

Even as she spoke the pointer of the triangle began moving, rapidly spelling a message.

"AL GEPPER IS A FRAUD," it wrote.



The medium sprang to his feet, allowing the board to fall from his lap.

"You pushed it!" he accused. "The test was unfair."

"Why, the very idea," chuckled Penny.

"Penny, please allow Mr. Gepper to conduct a true test," reproved Mrs. Weems severely. "Let me try."

Al Gepper, however, would have no more of the ouija board. Instead, he took a pad of white paper from his pocket. Seating Mrs. Weems at the kitchen table he requested her to write a message, which, without being shown to anyone in the room, was sealed in an envelope.

The medium pointedly requested Penny to examine the envelope to assure herself the writing could not be seen through the paper.

"You are satisfied that I have not read the message?" he asked.

"Yes," Penny admitted reluctantly.

The medium took the envelope, ran his fingers lightly over it, and returned it still sealed to Mrs. Weems.

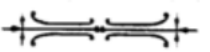
"If I am not mistaken, Madam, you wrote, 'Is the spirit of my cousin in this room?'"

"Why, I did!" exclaimed Mrs. Weems. "Those were the exact words! How did you know?"

Al Gepper smiled mysteriously.

"You have seen nothing, Madam," he said. "Now if conditions are right, it may be possible for us to learn if a Spirit has joined our group. Lower the blinds, please."

Mr. Hodges hastened to obey. With the kitchen in semi-darkness, the medium motioned for his audience to move a



few paces away. Taking his own position behind the kitchen table, he intoned:

"Oh, Spirit, if you are with us in the room, signal by lifting this piece of furniture."

Slowly the man moved his hands above the table. At first nothing happened, then to the astonishment of his audience, it lifted a few inches from the floor. There it hung suspended a moment before dropping into place again.

"You see?" With a triumphant ring to his voice, the medium crossed the room to raise the window shades. "Now do you doubt me?"

"No! No!" cried Mrs. Hodges tremulously. "Only a Spirit could have moved that table. Maud, perhaps it _was_ your Cousin David."

The medium gazed at Mrs. Weems with sympathetic interest.

"You have lost a loved one recently?" he inquired.

"Cousin David and I never were well acquainted," replied the housekeeper.

"That was why I was so surprised when he left me an inheritance."

"Mrs. Weems!" remonstrated Penny. She was dismayed by the revelation so casually offered.

"No doubt you would like to communicate with your departed cousin at some later time," the medium said smoothly. "Allow me to offer my services as an intermediary. No charge, of course."

"Why, that's very generous of you, Mr. Gepper."

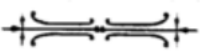
"Not at all. Friends of the Hodges are my friends. Shall we set a definite date--say tomorrow at two o'clock?"

"Yes, I'll come. That is, if the Hodges are to be present."

"Assuredly. Mrs. Hodges is definitely psychic and should contribute to our seance."

It was with the greatest of difficulty that Penny finally induced the housekeeper to leave the cottage. Al Gepper accompanied them to the door.

"Tomorrow at two," he repeated, smiling slyly at Penny. "And you may come also, my little doubter. I assure you it will be well worth your time."



CHAPTER 11 THE CELESTIAL TEMPLE

Penny, tell me the truth," Mrs. Weems urged as they drove home together.

"Didn't you push the ouija board?"

"Of course," laughed Penny. "But if I hadn't, Al Gepper would have. He was trying hard enough!"

"He said you were resisting the spirits."

"That was the worst sort of nonsense," Penny returned impatiently.

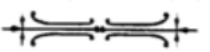
"Gepper is a fraud, and I wish you hadn't told him about your inheritance."

"How can you accuse him of being a fraud after you saw his marvelous demonstration? The table actually rose from the floor."

"I know it did," Penny acknowledged unwillingly. "But it must have been trickery."

"How could it have been? The table was an ordinary one. Mrs. Hodges uses
it every day of her life."

"I don't know how he did it," Penny responded. "All the same, I am sure he's a trickster. Promise me you won't tell him anything more about yourself or the inheritance."



"Very well, I'll promise if it gives you satisfaction," the housekeeper replied. "However, I do intend to keep my appointment."

Penny had no opportunity to relate to her father what had occurred at the Hodges home, for Mr. Parker was absent on a two-day business trip to a distant town. Feeling that she must tell someone, she sought Louise Sidell, and they discussed every angle of the affair.

"Will you attend the seance with Mrs. Weems?" Louise asked her curiously.

"Will I?" Penny repeated. "I'll be right there with bells! I intend to expose Mr. Al Gepper if it's the last act of my life!"

Returning home later in the afternoon, she found Mrs. Weems sitting on the living room floor, sorting a drawer of old photographs.

"You're not packing your things already?" Penny asked in alarm.

"Only these photographs," the housekeeper responded. "I wouldn't have started the task, only I got into it when the agent came."

"Agent?"

"A man from the Clamont Photograph Studio."

"Never heard of the place."

"It's opening this week. They're having a special offer--three old photographs enlarged for only twenty-five cents. I gave the man Cousin David's picture and two others."

"That is a bargain," remarked Penny. "I wish I had been here."

The evening meal was served, and afterwards Mrs. Weems devoted herself to the reading of travel books borrowed from

the library. Penny could find no occupation to satisfy her. She turned the radio on, switched it off again, and wandered restlessly from room to room. Finally she went to the telephone and called Louise.

"How about a little adventure?" she proposed. "And don't ask for explanations."

"Will we be home by ten o'clock? That's the parental deadline."

"Oh, yes, we'll make it easily. Meet me at the corner of Carabel and Clinton Streets."

Mrs. Weems was so engrossed in her book that she merely nodded as Penny explained that she and Louise were going for a walk. Reaching the appointed corner the girl found her chum awaiting her.

"Tell me about this so-called adventure," she commanded. "Where are we going?"

"To the Celestial Temple, Lou. At least, we'll look at it from the outside. Meetings are held there nearly every night at eight o'clock."

"Penny, I don't think I care to go."

"Nonsense! The meetings are open to the public, aren't they? We'll have a very interesting time."

"Oh, all right," Louise consented reluctantly. "But I can't understand why you're so interested in the place."

The girls took a bus to the end of the line, then walked three blocks until they came to Butternut Lane. For long stretches there were only scattered houses and the street lamps were far between. Becoming increasingly uneasy, Louise urged her chum to turn back.

"Why, we're at our destination now," Penny protested. "I am sure that must be the building."

She pointed to an old, rectangular brick structure only a few yards ahead. Obviously it once had been a church for there was a high bell tower, and behind the building a cluster of neglected tombstones gleamed in the moonlight.

The evenly spaced windows were illuminated, and music could be heard.

"Are you sure this is the place?" Louise inquired dubiously. "It looks like a church to me, and they're holding a service."

"Oh, the building hasn't been used for such purposes in over fifteen years," Penny explained. "I investigated, so I know its history. Until three years ago it was used as a county fire station. Only recently it was reclaimed by this Omar Society of Celestial Thought."

The girls moved closer. Through an open window they were able to see fifteen or twenty people seated in the pews. A woman played a wheezing organ while a man led the off-key singing.

"Let's go inside," Penny proposed.

Louise held back. "Oh, no, we can see everything from here. It looks as if it were a very stupid sort of meeting."

"Appearances are often deceiving. I want a ringside seat."

Penny pulled her chum toward the entrance door. There they hesitated, reading a large placard which bore the invitation:

The Public Is Invited. Services at eight p.m. daily.

"We're part of the public, Lou," urged Penny. "Come along."

She boldly opened the door, and there was no retreat.

Heads turned slightly as the girls entered the rear of the Temple. As quickly they turned forward again, but not before Penny had gained an impression, of sharp, appraising faces.

A man arose, bowed, and offered the girls his bench, although many others were available. They slipped into the pew, accepting a song book which was placed in Louise's hand.

While her chum sang in a thin, squeaky voice, Penny allowed her gaze to wander over the room. At the far end she saw a door which apparently opened into the bell tower. On a slightly raised platformwhere the leader stood, were two black-draped cabinets somewhat similar to the one she had seen at Mrs. Hodges' cottage. Otherwise, there was nothing of unusual interest.

The services were decorous to the point of being boring. Yet as the meeting went on, Penny and Louise both felt that they were being studied. More than once they surprised persons gazing at them.

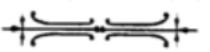
At the conclusion of the session which lasted no longer than thirty minutes, the leader asked the audience if any "brother" were present who wished to attempt a spirit communication. Immediately, Penny sat up a bit straighter, anticipating that interesting demonstrations were in store.

Nor was she mistaken. A thin, hard-faced man went to the rostrum, and in a loud voice began to call upon the spirits to make known their presence. Signs were at once forthcoming. The empty pews began to dance as if alive. The speaker's table lifted a foot from the floor and a pitcher of water fell from it, smashing into a dozen pieces. Louise, her eyes dilated with fear, edged closer to Penny.

"Let's go," she pleaded.

Penny shook her head.

A woman dressed in blue silk glided down the aisle, stopping beside the girls. She held a tray upon which were a number of objects, an opal ring, a knife, and several pins.



"Dearie," she said to Penny, "if you would care to have a message from a departed soul, place a trinket in this collection. Any personal object. Our leader will then exhort the spirit to appear."

"No, thank you," replied Louise, without giving her chum a chance to speak.

"Perhaps, you would prefer a private reading," the woman murmured. “I give them at my home, and the fee is trivial. Only a dollar."

"Thank you, no," Louise repeated firmly. "I'm not interested."

The woman shrugged and moved on down the aisle, pausing beside an elderly man to whom she addressed herself.

"Lou, why did you discourage her?" Penny whispered. "We might have learned something."

"I've learned quite enough. I'm leaving."

Louise squeezed past her chum, heading for the exit. Penny had no choice but to follow.

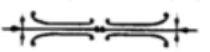
Before they could reach the door, it suddenly opened from the outside. A young man who had not bothered to remove his hat, entered. Seeing the girls, he abruptly halted, then turned and retreated.

Penny quickened her step. Taking Louise's hand she pulled her along at a faster pace. They reached the vestibule. It was deserted. Penny peered up and down the dark street.

"Well, he's gone," she remarked.

"Who?" Louise questioned in a puzzled voice. "You mean that man who entered the Temple and then left so suddenly?"

"I do," responded Penny. "Unless my eyes tricked me, he was none other than Al Gepper!”



CHAPTER 12
A MESSAGE FOR MRS. WEEMS

I don't know anyone answering to that name," remarked Louise. “However, the fellow did act as if he were retreating from us."

Penny glanced up and down the dark street. No one was to be seen, and since so little time had elapsed, she reasoned that the man had taken refuge either in the high weeds or the nearby cemetery.

"It must have been Gepper," she declared. "Naturally he wouldn't care to meet me here." Quickly Penny recounted the events of the afternoon.

"Then you think he may be connected with the Temple, Penny?"

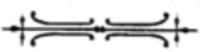
"That would be my guess. Lou, this place is nothing but a blind. The members of the society pretend to be honest spiritualists, while in reality they're charlatans. They hold services for one purpose only—to solicit persons for private readings."

"Isn't that illegal?"

"Of course it is. The police should raid the place."

"Then why don't they, Penny?"

"Dad says it's because they've been unable to obtain sufficient evidence. But they'll have it after we report what we've seen tonight!"



"How do you suppose they made things jump around as if they were alive?"

Louise remarked as the girls walked slowly toward home. "It frightenedme."

"Everything was done by trickery. I'm sure of that, Lou. Just as soon as Dad returns I shall make a full report to him. We'll see what he can do about it."

By the time Penny arrived home, Mrs. Weems had retired to her room. However, the light still burned and the door was open a crack. Rapping, the girl entered, for she was eager to tell the housekeeper about her visit to the Celestial Temple.

Mrs. Weems sat at the desk. Hastily she closed one of the drawers, and turned the key.

"You startled me, Penny!" she exclaimed. "I do wish you would give more warning before you descend upon one."

"Sorry," apologized Penny, glancing curiously toward the desk. "Oh, I see!"

"You see what?" demanded the housekeeper.

"Six thousand dollars reposing in a desk drawer!"

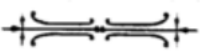
Mrs. Weems' look of consternation betrayed her. She glanced at the locked drawer, and then laughed.

"For an instant I thought you actually could see the money, Penny."

"Then my guess was right?"

"I keep the money in the drawer," Mrs. Weems admitted.

Penny sat down on the edge of the bed, drawing up her knees for a chin rest.



"Mrs. Weems, don't you think it's risky keeping so much money here?"

"It will only be for a few days, Penny. I'll have it converted into traveler's cheques as soon as I am ready to start west."

"The desk doesn't seem a safe place to me."

"You're the only person who knows where I keep the money, Penny. Oh, yes, I told Mrs. Hodges, but she is to be trusted. No one can steal it as long as I have the key."

Mrs. Weems tapped a black velvet ribbon which she wore about her neck.

"I keep this on me day and night," she declared. "No thief ever will get it way from me."

Penny said nothing more about the matter. Instead, she launched into a highly colored account of her visit to the Celestial Temple. The housekeeper expressed disapproval, remarking that she never would have granted permission had she known in advance where the girls were going. Nevertheless, her eager questions made it evident that she was deeply interested in the demonstration which had been witnessed.

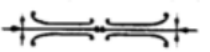
"I don't see how you can call it trickery," she protested. "You have no proof, Penny."

"Never in the world will I believe that spirits can make tables do a dance, Mrs. Weems! Probably the furniture had special wiring or something of the sort."

"You can't say that about the table at Mrs. Hodges', Penny."

"No, it seemed to be just an ordinary piece of furniture," the girl admitted reluctantly. "All the same, Al Gepper is a fraud, and I wish you wouldn't attend his old seance tomorrow."

"But Penny, I gave my promise."



"I can run over to the house and tell him you've changed your mind."

Mrs. Weems shook her head. "No, Penny, I am curious to learn if he will be able to communicate with the spirits. Tomorrow's seance should provide a genuine test. The man knows nothing about me or my ancestors."

"Mrs. Hodges probably has provided all the information he'll require."

"I telephoned her yesterday and requested her not to tell Mr. Gepper anything about me. She'll respect my wishes. The test should prove a true one."

Penny sighed and arose from the bed. Knowing Mrs. Weems as she did, she realized that her opinion could not be changed by argument. It was her hope that Al Gepper would discredit himself by failing in the seance.

"Penny, please promise that you'll do nothing outrageous tomorrow," Mrs. Weems begged as the girl started to leave. "I am sure Mr. Gepper feels that you are antagonistic."

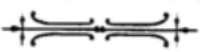
"I'll try to behave myself," Penny laughed. "Yes, we'll give Mr. Gepper a chance to prove what he can do."

At two the following afternoon she and Mrs. Weems presented themselves at the Hodges' cottage. Both Mr. Hodges and his wife, who were to sit in at the seance, were trembling with anticipation.

"Mr. Gepper is simply wonderful," the seamstress confided to Mrs. Weems.

"He tells me that I have great healing powers as well as a psychic personality."

"Jenny, I hope you haven't told him anything about me," the housekeeper mentioned.



"Oh, no, Maud. For that matter, he's said nothing about you since you were here."

Mrs. Weems cast Penny an "I-told-you-so" glance which was not lost upon Al Gepper who entered the room at that moment.

"I am ready for you, ladies," he said. "Kindly follow me."

In the upstairs room blinds had been drawn. Al Gepper indicated that his audience was to occupy the chairs around the circular table.

"Before we attempt to communicate with the departed souls, I wish to assure you that I employ no trickery," he announced, looking hard at Penny. "You may examine the table or the cabinet if you wish."

"Oh, no, Mr. Gepper," murmured Mrs. Hodges. "We trust you."

"I'll look, if you don't mind," said Penny.

She peered beneath the table, thumped it several times, and pulled aside the curtain of the cabinet. It was empty.

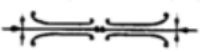
"Now if you are quite satisfied, shall we begin?" purred Mr. Gepper. “It will make it much easier, if each one of you will give me a personal object."

"A la the Celestial Temple method," muttered Penny beneath her breath.

"What was that?" questioned the medium sharply.

"Nothing. I was merely thinking to myself."

"Then please think more quietly. I must warn you that this seance cannot be successful unless each person present concentrates, entering into the occasion with the deepest of sincerity."



"I assure you, I am as sincere as yourself," Penny responded gravely.

Mr. Hodges deposited his gold watch on the table. His wife offered a pin and Mrs. Weems a plain band ring. Penny parted with a handkerchief.

After everyone was seated about the table, Al Gepper played several phonograph records, all the while exhorting the Spirits to appear.

Taking Mrs. Weems' ring from the tray before him, he pressed it to his forehead. A convulsive shudder wracked his body.

"Someone comes to me--" he mumbled. "Someone comes, giving the name of David--David Swester."

"My cousin," breathed Mrs. Weems in awe.

"He is tall and dark with a scar over his left eye," resumed the medium.

"I see him plainly now."

"That _is_ David!" cried the housekeeper, leaning forward in her eagerness.

"David, have you a message for us?" the medium intoned.

There was a long silence, during which the man could be seen writhing and twisting in the semi-darkness. Then his voice began again:

"David has a message for a person called Maud."

"I am Maud," said Mrs. Weems tremulously. "Oh, what does he say?"

"That he is well and happy in the Spirit World, but he is worried about Maud."

"Worried about me? Why?"

The medium again seemed to undergo physical suffering, but presently the message "came through," although not in an entirely clear form.

"David's voice has faded. I am not certain, but it has something to do with six thousand dollars."

"The exact amount he left to me!" Mrs. Weems murmured.

"David is afraid that you will not have the wisdom to invest the money wisely. He warns you that the present place where you have it deposited is not safe. He will tell you what to do with it. Now the voice is fading again. David has gone."

With another convulsive shudder, Al Gepper straightened from the position into which he had slumped. Resuming his normal tone he said:

"That is all. The connection with Cousin David has been broken."

"Can't we contact him again?" Mrs. Weems asked in disappointment.

"Not today. Possibly tomorrow at this same hour."

"Couldn't you call up another Spirit by using my pin or Pa's watch?" Mrs. Hodges suggested wistfully.

Al Gepper raised one of the window blinds. "I am very, very tired," he said. "This seance was particularly exhausting due to the presence of someone antagonistic. Tomorrow if conditions are right, I hope actually to materialize Cousin David. The poor soul is trying so hard to get a message through to the one he calls Maud."

"You mean I'll be able to see him?" the housekeeper asked incredulously.

"I hope and believe so. I must rest now. After a seance I should refresh myself with sleep."

"Of course," agreed Mrs. Hodges. "We are selfish to overtax you."

Recovering their trinkets, the elderly couple and Mrs. Weems went from the room. Penny was the last to leave.

"Well, sister?" inquired the medium in a low voice. "Were you convinced, or do you still think that you can show up Al Gepper?"

"I think," said Penny softly, "that you are a very clever man. But clever as you are, one of your well-trained ghosts may yet lead you to the city jail!"

CHAPTER 13

COUSIN DAVID'S GHOST

When Penny reached the lower floor she found Mrs. Weems and the Hodges excitedly discussing the seance. The seamstress and her husband emphatically declared that they had given the medium no information regarding either the housekeeper or the deceased Cousin David.

"Then there can be only one explanation," Mrs. Weems said.

"We were truly in communication with a departed spirit."

"Don't you agree, Penny?" inquired Mrs. Hodges.

"I am afraid I can't," she replied.

"The test was a fair one," Mrs. Weems insisted. "Mr. Gepper couldn't have described Cousin David so accurately if he hadn't actually seen him as he materialized from the spirit world."

"Al Gepper could have obtained much of his information from persons in Riverview," Penny responded.

"About me, perhaps," the housekeeper conceded. "But not about Cousin David. Why, I doubt if anyone save myself knew he had a scar over his eye. He received it in an automobile accident twelve or thirteen years ago."

"Just think!" murmured Mrs. Hodges. "Tomorrow you may actually be able to see your departed cousin!"

In vain Penny argued that Al Gepper was a trickster. She was unable to offer the slightest evidence to support her contention while, on the other hand, the Hodges reminded

her that the medium had never asked one penny for his services. From the cottage Penny went directly to the _Star_ office, feeling certain that her father would have returned there from his trip. Nor was
she mistaken. Gaining admittance to the private office, she wasted no words in relating everything which had transpired during his absence. Her father's attention was flattering.

"Penny, you actually saw all this?" he questioned when she had finished.

"Oh, yes! At the Celestial Temple Louise was with me, too. We thought you might take up the matter with the police."

"That's exactly what I will do," decided Mr. Parker. "I've turned the matter over in my mind for several days. The Star- will take the initiative in driving these mediums, character readers and the like out of Riverview!"

"Oh, Dad, I was hoping you'd say that!"

Mr. Parker pressed a desk buzzer. Summoning DeWitt, he told of his plan to launch an active campaign.

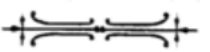
"Nothing will please me better, Chief," responded the city editor. “Where do we start?"

"We'll tip the police to what is going on at the Celestial Temple. Have them send detectives there for tonight's meeting. Then when the usual hocus-pocus starts, arrests can be made. Have photographers and a good reporter on hand."

"That should start the ball rolling," agreed DeWitt. "I'll assign Jerry Livingston to the story. Salt Sommers is my best photographer."

"Get busy right away," Mr. Parker ordered. "We'll play the story big tomorrow--give it a spread."

"How about Al Gepper?" Penny inquired after DeWitt had gone. "Could he be arrested without involving the Hodges?"



"Not very easily if he lives at their place. Has he accepted money for the seances he conducts there?"

"He hasn't taken any yet from Mrs. Weems. I am sure he must have other customers."

"You have no proof of it?"

"No."

"Suppose we forget Al Gepper for the time being, and concentrate on the Celestial Temple," Mr. Parker proposed. "In the meantime, learn everything you can about the man's methods."

"No assignment would please me more, Dad. I've the same as promised Mr.
Gepper he'll land in jail, and I want to make good."

Mr. Parker began to pace the floor. "I'll write a scorching editorial," he said. "We'll fight ignorance with information. Our reporters must learn how these mediums do their tricks, and expose them to the gullible public."

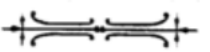
"I'll do everything I can to help," Penny promised eagerly. "May I have Al Gepper for my particular fish bait?"

"He's your assignment. And I'm depending upon you to see that he doesn't work any of his trickery on Mrs. Weems. If she can't be persuaded to remain away from the Hodges', then we must protect her as best we can."

"I'll try to accompany her every time she goes there, Dad. I am afraid he may be after her money."

"Gepper doesn't know she inherited six thousand dollars?" Mr. Parker asked in alarm.

"Yes, she dropped the information that she had come into money. He supplied figures himself."



"I wonder how?"

"I haven't the slightest idea, Dad. Gepper is as clever a man as ever I met. Honestly, it wouldn't surprise me if he does produce Cousin David at tomorrow's seance."

Mr. Parker snorted in disgust.

"Tommyrot! The man will make an excuse about the conditions not being right, and fail."

"Perhaps, but he seems pretty confident."

"You expect to attend the seance?"

"Oh, definitely. Jungle beasts couldn't keep me away."

"Then be alert every instant--without appearing too suspicious, of course. Try to learn how the man accomplishes his tricks."

"Leave it to me," chuckled Penny. "Mr. Al Gepper is due for his first shock when he wakes up tomorrow and reads that the Celestial Temple has been raided. Unless I am much mistaken, that place is one of his favorite haunts."

Leaving the newspaper office, Penny went directly home. She longed to stop at the Sidell home, but she had promised her father to say nothing about the planned raid until it was an accomplished fact. Feeling the need of work to occupy her time, she washed the maroon car and waxed the fading paint of Leaping Lena.

At six o'clock her father came home for dinner.

"Any news?" Penny asked, running to meet him.

"Everything's set," he answered. "DeWitt laid your information before the police. Tonight three detectives will attend the meeting at the Temple. If anything out of the way happens, the raid will be staged."

Penny was so tense with expectation that she was unable to do justice to the delicious dinner which Mrs. Weems had prepared. Her father, too, seemed unusually restless. After dinner he made a pretense of reading the paper, but actually his eyes did not see the print.

The hands of the clock scarcely appeared to move, so slowly did time pass. Eight o'clock came, then nine. Suddenly the telephone rang.

Penny was away in an instant to answer it. From the next room she called to her father:

"It's for you, Dad! DeWitt, I think."

"I told him to telephone me as soon as the raid was staged." Mr. Parker arose and went quickly to take the receiver. Penny hovered at his elbow.

"Hello! DeWitt?" the publisher asked, and after a slight pause: "Oh, I see. No, I don't think Penny was mistaken. It's more likely there was a tip-off."

He hung up the receiver and turned toward Penny who anticipated the news.

"The raid was a failure?"

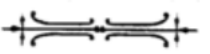
"Yes, Penny. Detectives spent two hours at the meeting. Nothing happened. It was impossible to make arrests."

"They must have been recognized as detectives."

"Undoubtedly."

"Others will be assigned to the case?"

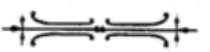
"I doubt it, Penny. DeWitt reports that the police have become convinced that the spiritualists who use the Temple are not operating for profit."



"Louise and I know better because she was approached." Penny anxiously regarded her father. "Dad, even if the police do give up, we won't, will we?"

"No, we're in this fight and we'll stay in it," he answered grimly.

"We'll put some new teeth in our trap. And the next time it's sprung, I warrant you we'll catch a crook."



CHAPTER 14
WET PAINT

Promptly at two o'clock the following afternoon, Penny and Mrs. Weems presented themselves at the Hodges' cottage for the appointed seance. Already Mr. Gepper awaited them in the darkened apartment on the second floor.

Penny's glance about the room found everything in the same order as upon the previous visit, save that an easel with a large black sheet of artist's paper stood beside the cabinet.

She moved as if to examine it. Al Gepper intercepted her by saying:

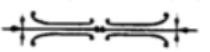
"Sit here, if you please. Beside Mrs. Weems. I'll call the Hodges and we'll start at once."

The medium went to the door and shouted down the stairway. Penny noticed that he remained where he could watch her every move in a mirror which hung on the wall. She shrewdly guessed that he was afraid she might attempt to examine either the cabinet or the easel.

Mr. and Mrs. Hodges came in response to the call, taking chairs about the circular table. The gaze which they fastened upon Al Gepper was almost worshipful.

"Now today I hope to materialize the Spirit of Cousin David," announced the medium. "The task will be difficult, as you must realize. After the seance begins I am compelled to request absolute quiet. The slightest movement may frighten away the Spirits."

"Why are spirits so timid?" asked Penny.



"Because their beings are so sensitive that they instantly feel an unfriendly presence," the man responded glibly. "Please hold hands, and use every precaution that contact is not broken."

Mrs. Weems took one of Penny's hands and Mr. Hodges the other. Mrs. Hodges sat next to her husband.

After lowering black curtains over the window blinds to further darken the room, the medium returned to his chair. Those at the table were unable to distinguish his form, and for a time there was no sound save the scratching music of a phonograph record.

Presently the medium exhorted the Spirit of Cousin David to appear. For at least ten minutes there was no indication that communication was to be established. Then a cowbell tinkled, causing Mrs. Weems to shake and tremble.

"Are you there, David?" called the medium.

The bell jingled violently.

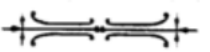
"We are ready, David," intoned the medium. "Have you a message for us?"

To Penny's amazement, a pair of shapely white hands slowly materialized, apparently pulling aside the curtain of the cabinet above the medium's head. In the darkness they glowed with a weird phosphorescent light.

Next appeared a white-rimmed slate, upon which luminous words were written: "I am the Spirit of Cousin David. Is Maud here?"

"Yes, yes," responded Mrs. Weems, quivering with excitement. "Have you a message for me?"

Again the hand wrote: "My happiness in this world beyond is disturbed. Maud, do not squander the money which I gave to you."



"Squander it?" the housekeeper said aloud. "Why, I've scarcely spent a penny!"

"A trip to California is ill-advised," wrote the hand. "Invest your money in good eight per cent securities. There are many excellent companies--the Brantwell Corporation, White and Edwards, the Bierkamp Company."

The slate vanished and once more the jingling of the cowbell denoted that the spirit was moving away.

The medium spoke. "Contact has been broken. Shall we try to reach Cousin David again?"

"Oh, please!" pleaded Mrs. Weems. "I don't know what to do now. I've planned on the western trip and I can't understand why Cousin David should advise me to give it up."

"I wouldn't go agin' the Spirits if I was you," advised Mr. Hodges. "You better change your plans, Maud."

"But how can I be certain that the message came from Cousin David?" the housekeeper quavered. "Oh, dear, I am so upset! If only I could be certain."

"Madam, I hope you do not distrust me," said Al Gepper reprovingly.

"Oh, no, it's not that. I'm just upset."

"Perhaps, if you actually saw your cousin it would set your mind at rest."

"Is it possible to see him?"

"I cannot promise, but we will try. Hold hands again please, and everyone concentrate."

There followed an interval during which the medium pleaded with the Spirit of Cousin David to return and show himself. Suddenly the group was startled to see a luminous banjo

move high through the air, unsupported by any hand. It began to play "Down upon the Swanee River."

Midway through the selection, the music broke off and the banjo disappeared. An instant later Mrs. Hodges uttered a choked cry.

"The easel! Look at it, Maud!"

All eyes turned toward the painter's canvas. As the medium focused a flashlight upon it, the face of an elderly man slowly materialized on the blank surface, the picture appearing in red, blue and finally black oil paint.

"It _is_ Cousin David!" whispered Mrs. Weems, gripping Penny's hand so tightly that it hurt. "He looks exactly as he did when last I saw him!"

The medium extinguished his light and again the room was dark. Mrs. Weems' chair creaked as she stirred restlessly. Mr. Hodges' heavy breathing could be plainly heard. There was no other sound. Everyone waited in tense expectancy, sensing that the climax of the seance was at hand.

Suddenly, behind Al Gepper's chair a spot of ethereal light appeared. As Penny watched, it grew in size until the figure had assumed the proportions of a man. Then, to her further amazement, it slowly rose toward the ceiling, hovering above Mrs. Weems' chair.

Throughout the seance Penny had remained firm in her conviction that the medium had resorted to trickery to produce his startling effects. Although she could not be sure, she thought that several times he had slipped from his chair to enter the conveniently placed cabinet. She also believed that the only way he could have materialized the ghost was by donning luminous robes.

"I'll end his little game once and for all," she thought.

Deliberately she waited until the ghostly figure floated close to her own chair. Then with a sudden upward spring, she snatched at it.

Greatly to her chagrin, her hand encountered nothing solid. With the speed of lightning, the figure streaked toward the cabinet behind Al Gepper's chair and was seen no more.

Arising, the medium switched on the room lights. His face was white with anger.

"I warned you to make no move," he said harshly to Penny. “You deliberately disobeyed me."

"Oh, Penny, why did you do it?" wailed Mrs. Weems. "I was so eager to get another message from Cousin David."

"His Spirit has been frightened away," announced the medium. "It will be impossible ever to recall him. For that matter, I shall never again conduct a seance with this young person present. She is a disturbing element."

"Oh, Penny, you've ruined everything," said Mrs. Weems accusingly. “Why do you act so outrageously?"

Penny started to speak and then changed her mind. Mrs. Weems, the seamstress and her husband, all were gazing at her with deep reproach. She realized that there was nothing she could say which would make them understand.

She arose and walked to the easel. The painting of Cousin David remained clearly visible. She touched it and then glanced at her finger which bore a streak of red.

The paint was still wet.

Penny stared at her finger a moment. Lifting her eyes she met the triumphant gaze of Al Gepper.

"Not even a skillful artist could have painted a picture so quickly," he said with a smirk. "Only a spirit would have the ability. You are dumbfounded, my little one?"

"No, just plain dumb," answered Penny. "I salute you, Mr. Gepper."

Without waiting for Mrs. Weems, she turned and went from the house.

"Now how _did_ he do it?" she muttered. "I saw everything and yet I am more in the dark than ever. But I am sure of one thing. Unless I work fast, Al Gepper is almost certain to obtain Mrs. Weems' inheritance."

CHAPTER 15
HIDDEN MONEY

One of Penny's first acts upon arriving home was to scan the telephone directory under the heading, Investment Firms. The three companies mentioned during the seance, White and Edwards, Brantwell, and Bierkamp, were unlisted.

"Evidently there are no such firms in Riverview," she reflected. "But why was Mrs. Weems advised to invest her money with one of them? It looks very suspicious to me!"

Not until after five o'clock did Mrs. Weems return from the Hodges'. She seemed rather upset, and when Penny tried to bring up the subject of the seance, said distantly:

"Please, Penny, I prefer not to discuss it. Your conduct was disgraceful."

"I apologize for grabbing at the ghost, Mrs. Weems. I only did it to prove that Al Gepper is a fraud."

"Your motives were quite apparent. One could not blame Mr. Gepper for being angry."

"Oh, Mrs. Weems," said Penny in desperation. "How can you be taken in by his smooth line? His one purpose is to obtain your money."

"You are very unjust," the housekeeper responded. "Today I tried to pay Mr. Gepper for the seance and he would not accept one penny."

"That's because he is playing for higher stakes."

"It's no use discussing the matter with you," Mrs. Weems shrugged. “You are prejudiced and will give the man credit for nothing."

"I give him credit for being very clever. Mrs. Weems, please promise that you'll not allow him to invest your money for you."

"I have no intention of doing so, Penny. It does seem to me that I should consider Cousin David's wishes in the matter. Very likely I shall abandon my plans for the western trip."

"And stay here with us?" Penny cried eagerly.

"No, I am thinking of going to a larger city and taking an apartment. With my money invested in eight per cent securities, I should have a comfortable little income."

"Mrs. Weems, I've heard Dad say over and over that sound securities will not pay such a high rate of interest. Promise you won't invest your money until you've talked with him."

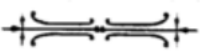
"You're always asking me to promise something or other," the housekeeper sighed. "This time I shall use my own judgment."

Realizing that further argument was only a waste of breath, Penny wandered outside to await her father. When he came, they sat together on the front porch steps, discussing the situation.

"I'll drop a word of advice to Mrs. Weems at the first opportunity,” offered Mr. Parker. "If she is in the mood you describe, it would not be wise to bring up the subject tonight. She merely would resent my interference."

"What worries me is that I am afraid she may have told Al Gepper where the money is kept."

"Tomorrow I'll urge her again to deposit it in a bank. We'll do our best to protect her from these sharpers."



The publisher had been very much interested in Penny's account of the seance. However, he was unable to explain how the various tricks had been accomplished.

"Dad," Penny said thoughtfully, "you don't suppose there's any chance it wasn't trickery?"

"Certainly not! I hope you're not falling under this fellow's spell?"

"No, but it gave me a real shock when I saw Cousin David's face materialize on the canvas. It was the absolute image of him--or rather of a picture Mrs. Weems once showed me."
A startled expression came over Penny's face. Without explanation, she sprang to her feet and ran to the kitchen.

"Mrs. Weems," she cried, "did you ever get it back? Your picture!"

"What picture, Penny?" The housekeeper scarcely glanced up as she vigorously scrubbed carrots.

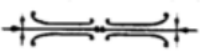
"I mean the one of Cousin David. You allowed a photographer to take it for enlargement."

"It hasn't been returned," Mrs. Weems admitted. "I can't imagine why the work takes so long."

"I think I can," announced Penny. "But you never would believe me if I told you, so I won't."

Racing to the porch, she revealed to her father what she thought had occurred. It was her theory that the agent who had called at the Parker home days earlier had in actuality been one of Al Gepper’s assistants.

"Don't you see, Dad!" she cried. "The man obtained a picture of Cousin David, and probably turned it over to the medium." Her face fell slightly. "Of course, that still doesn't explain how the painting slowly materialized."



"Nor does it explain the ghost or the banjo. Penny, couldn't Gepper have painted the picture himself in the darkness?"

"There wasn't time, Dad. Besides, he held a flashlight on the painting. No human hand touched it."

"You say, too, that the banjo was high overhead when it played?"

"That's right, Dad. Gepper couldn't have reached the strings. The instrument floated free in the air."

"Sounds fantastic."

"Believe me, it was, Dad. It's no wonder Gepper is gaining such influence over Mrs. Weems. He's as slick as a greased fox!"

"I'll have Jerry go to the house and try to learn how the fellow operates," declared Mr. Parker. "We can't break the story until we have absolute evidence that Gepper has obtained money under false pretenses."

The next day Penny remained close at home. Mrs. Weems still treated her somewhat distantly, leaving the house immediately after lunch and declining to explain where she was going. Penny was quite certain that her destination was the Hodges' cottage.

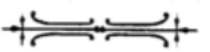
"Guess I'll run over and see Louise," she thought restlessly. "Nothing to do here."

Before she could leave the house, the doorbell rang. A man of perhaps thirty, well dressed, with a leather briefcase tucked under his arm, stood on the front porch. He bowed politely to Penny.

"This is where Mrs. Weems resides, I believe?"

"Yes, but she isn't here now."

"When will she be home?"



"I can't say," replied Penny. "Are you an agent?"

The man's appearance displeased her although she could not have said exactly why. His smile was too ingratiating, his eyes calculating and hard.

"My name is Bierkamp," he explained. "I represent the Harold G. Bierkamp Investment Company."

Penny stiffened. She glared at the agent. "You mean you represent the Al Gepper Spookus Company," she said in a cutting voice. "Well, Mrs. Weems doesn't want any of your wonderful eight per cent stocks! She'll not see you, so don't come here again!"

"And who are you to speak for her?" the man retorted.

"If you come here again, I'll call the police," Penny threatened. “Now get out!"

Without another word, the man retreated down the street. Penny watched until he turned a corner and was lost to view. She was a trifle worried as to what she had done.

"If Mrs. Weems learns about this she'll never forgive me," she thought uneasily. "But he was a crook sent by Al Gepper. I know it."

Wandering upstairs, she entered the bathroom, intending to wash before going to Louise's home. On the tiled floor lay a velvet ribbon with a key attached. At once, Penny realized that Mrs. Weems had left it there inadvertently.

"It's the key to her desk," she reflected, picking it up. "And she insists that her money is kept in a safe place! I have a notion to play a joke on her."

The longer Penny considered the idea, the more it pleased her. Jubilantly, she set forth for the Sidell home. Taking Louise into her confidence, she visited a novelty shop and purchased a supply of fake money.

Returning home, she then unlocked the drawer of Mrs. Weems' desk and, removing the six thousand dollars, replaced it with neat stacks of imitation bills. Louise watched her with misgiving.

"Penny, this joke of yours isn't likely to strike Mrs. Weems as very funny," she warned. "You're always doing things which get you into trouble."

"This is in a good cause, Lou. I am protecting Mrs. Weems from her own folly."

"What will you do with the money?"

"Deposit it in a bank."

"You are taking matters into your hands with a vengeance! Suppose you're robbed on the way downtown?"

"That would complicate my life. Upon second thought, I'll send for an armored truck."

To Louise's amazement, Penny actually carried through her plan. A heavily guarded express truck presently drew up before the Parker residence, and Mrs. Weems' money was turned over to the two armed men who promised that it would be delivered safely to the First National Bank.

"There, that's a load off my mind," said Penny. "Just let Al Gepper try to steal Mrs. Weems' money now!"

Louise shook her head sadly. "You may be accused of stealing yourself. I wouldn't be in your slippers when Mrs. Weems learns about this."

"Oh, I'll be able to explain," laughed Penny.

The joke she had played did not seem quite so funny an hour later. Mrs. Weems returned home and without comment recovered the key which had been replaced on the lavatory floor. She did not open her desk or mention the money.

At dinner Penny was so subdued that the housekeeper inquired if she were ill.

"Not yet," the girl answered. "I'm just thinking about the future. It's so depressing."

"Perhaps a picture show would cheer us all," proposed Mr. Parker.

Mrs. Weems displayed interest, and Penny, without enthusiasm, agreed to go. Eight o'clock found them at the Avalon, a neighborhood theatre. The show was not to Penny's liking, although her father and the housekeeper seemed to enjoy it. She squirmed restlessly, and finally whispered to her father that she was returning home.

In truth, as Penny well knew, she was suffering from an acute case of "conscience." Now that it was too late, she regretted having meddled with Mrs. Weems' money.

Gloomily she walked home alone. As she entered, she heard the telephone ringing, but before she could answer, the party hung up. With a sigh Penny locked the front door again, switched out the lights and went to bed.

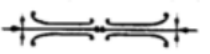
For a long while she lay staring at a patch of moonlight on the bedroom carpet. Although she felt tired she could not sleep.

"It's just as Louise said," she reflected. "I'm always getting myself into hot water and for no good reason, either!"

Her morose thoughts were interrupted as a hard object thudded against a nearby wall. Penny sat up, listening. She believed that the sound had come from Mrs. Weems' room, yet she knew she was alone in the house.

Rolling from bed, she groped for a robe, and without turning on the lights, tiptoed down the hall. Mrs. Weems' door stood open. Was some intruder hidden in that room?

Peering inside, Penny at first noticed nothing amiss. Then her gaze fastened on the window sill, plainly visible in the moonlight. Two iron hooks, evenly spaced, had been clamped over the ledge!



CHAPTER 16 OVER THE WINDOW LEDGE

As Penny flattened herself against the wall, the head and shoulders of a man slowly rose into view. Although his body was plainly silhouetted in the moonlight, she could not see his face.

The intruder raised the sash, making no sound. He hesitated, listening a moment, then dropped lightly into the bedroom.

Without turning on a flashlight which he carried, he went directly to Mrs. Weems' desk. So deliberate was the action that Penny instantly decided the fellow had come for a particular purpose and knew the lay-out of the entire house.

"He means to steal Mrs. Weems' money!" she thought.

Opening the desk, the man tried the drawer where the inheritance fundshad been hidden. Failing to unlock it with a key, he took a tool from his pocket and in a moment had broken the lock.

Removing the stack of fake bills which Penny had substituted, he thrust them into his coat. Taking no interest in anything else in the room, he moved stealthily toward the window.

Penny knew there was no one within calling distance and that the man probably was armed. Wisdom dictated that she remain in hiding, but she was determined the thief should

not escape. Hoping to take him by surprise, she stalked forward.

A board creaked. With a muttered exclamation the man whirled around. At the same instant Penny flung herself upon him, diving low in imitation of a football tackle.

The thief reeled, but instead of falling he recovered his balance and gave Penny a tremendous shove which sent her sprawling backwards. Before she could regain her feet, he ran to the window. Swinging himself over the ledge, he vanished from view.

By the time Penny reached the window there was no sign of the intruder. He had disappeared as if into thin air. However, she knew that the man must have descended by means of a ladder which he had hastily removed.

She ran her hand over the window ledge. The iron hooks no longer were there, only the scars which had been cut in the wood.

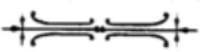
"This undoubtedly was the same fellow who broke into the Kohl apartment!" she thought. "But how did he escape so quickly?"

Penny started for a telephone, intending to notify the police. However, when it occurred to her that her father might not wish the matter made public, she changed her mind and ran downstairs.

Unlocking the rear door, she glanced carefully about the yard. There was no one in sight, no movement behind any of the shrubbery.

"He's gone, of course," she thought.

Penny wore no shoes. Finding a pair of old galoshes on the porch, she protected her feet with them, and hobbled into the yard.



The grass beneath Mrs. Weems' window had been trampled, but at first glance there was no clue to indicate how the burglar had gained entrance to the house.

"Obviously he used a ladder," she reasoned. "But how did he descend so quickly? And what became of the ladder? I know he never had time to carry away one of the ordinary type."

A dark object lying on the grass attracted Penny's attention. Picking it up, she carried it to the porch and switched on a light that she might see to better advantage. In her hand she held a torn strand of black silk rope.

"This may be an important clue!" she thought excitedly. "I know now how the man entered the house!"

As Penny examined the piece of rope, automobile headlight beams cut a path across the yard. The Parker car drew up on the driveway and both Mrs. Weems and Mr. Parker alighted.

"Dad, come here quickly!" Penny called as he started to open the garage doors.

"What's wrong, Penny?"

Both the publisher and Mrs. Weems came toward the porch.

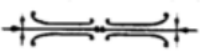
"We've had a burglar," Penny announced. "He broke into Mrs. Weems' room, smashing the lock on the desk--"

"My money!" the housekeeper exclaimed in horror. "Oh, Penny, don't tell me that it's gone!"

"He escaped with the contents of the drawer."

Mrs. Weems gave a moan of anguish. "Haven't you called the police?" she demanded. "When did it happen? Tell me everything!"

"First, I'll set your mind at rest," Penny replied. "Your money is safe."



"Oh! I never was so relieved in all my born days." Mrs. Weems sagged weakly into a porch rocker. "Penny, how could you torture me by letting me think the money was stolen?"

"Because I have a confession to make, Mrs. Weems. You left the key to your desk lying on the bathroom floor. I thought it might be a good joke to move the money to another place."

"Oh, you darling blessed girl!" laughed Mrs. Weems. "Where did you hide it, Penny? Are you sure it's safe?"

"It should be. I had it taken to the First National Bank and deposited in your name. The thief carried off a package of fake money."

"Rather high-handed weren't you?" commented her father.

"Now don't you scold her," spoke Mrs. Weems quickly. "I am glad Penny acted as she did. Otherwise, I might have lost my entire inheritance."

Penny drew a deep breath. "I'm relieved you feel that way about it. I wish I could see the burglar's face when he discovers he stole worthless money!"

Both the housekeeper and Mr. Parker pressed her with questions. She revealed exactly what had occurred during their absence, showing them the strand of black silk rope.

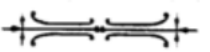
"Dad, I think this may be a valuable clue," she declared. "What does it suggest to you?"

"Not much of anything, I am afraid."

"You remember that when the Kohls were robbed the police couldn't figure out how the burglar gained entrance?"

"Yes, I recall the story."

"Well, I believe the same man committed both burglaries."



"Why do you think so, Penny?"

"At the Kohl's the police found two marks on the window ledge apparently made by iron hooks. Similar marks are on the sill in Mrs. Weems' room. For that matter, I distinctly saw the iron pieces bite into the wood."

"Let's look at them," proposed Mr. Parker.

"Only the marks are there now, Dad. The man jerked the hooks loose after he descended. They must have been attached to his ladder."

"I thought you said he had none, Penny."

"There was no time for him to have carried away an ordinary, heavy ladder. I think the one he used must have been made of silk."

"And this is a piece of it!" Mr. Parker exclaimed, examining the twisted strand with new interest. "Your theory sounds plausible. It would be possible for a man to scale a wall with such a ladder."

"He could jerk loose the hooks in an instant, too, Dad. The ladder would fit into a small suitcase, or even his pocket!"

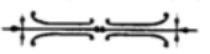
"There's one objection to your theory, Penny. How could such a ladder be raised to the window ledge? It naturally would be limp."

"That part has me puzzled, I'll admit."

"I never even heard of a silken ladder," said Mrs. Weems doubtfully.

"I once saw one being made," declared Penny with deliberate emphasis. “At a Japanese Shop on Dorr Street."

"That's right, you spoke of it!" exclaimed her father. “Penny, you may have something!"



"I think so, Dad. This strand of twisted silk may lead straight to Kano's Curio Shop."

"And from there?"

Penny hesitated, glancing at Mrs. Weems. She knew that the housekeeper might take offense, but she answered quietly:

"My guess would be to Al Gepper, Dad. Who but he or an accomplice could have known where the money was hidden?"

CHAPTER 17
KANO'S CURIO SHOP

As Penny had anticipated, Mrs. Weems indignantly declared that she didnot believe Mr. Gepper could have had any connection with the attempted robbery. Yet, even as she made the assertion, a startled expression came over her face.

"Think back, Mrs. Weems," urged Mr. Parker. "How many persons knew where you had secreted the money?"

"I told Mrs. Hodges."

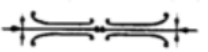
"And Al Gepper?" Penny probed.

"Well--" The housekeeper looked ill at ease. "He may have heard me talking with Mrs. Hodges. I remember he passed through the hall while we were together."

"What day was that?" inquired Penny.

"Yesterday. After the seance. But I can't believe that Mr. Gepper would try to steal the money. I just can't!"

"From what Penny has told me of the man, I should judge that he is a schemer," contributed Mr. Parker. "You know the Star- has started a vigorous campaign directed against such mediums as Al Gepper."



"But he told me such remarkable things about Cousin David," protested Mrs. Weems. "Facts which couldn't be faked."

"Oh, Gepper doesn't make many false moves," acknowledged Penny. "He's a smooth worker. All the same, he's a fake."

"How could he have faked Cousin David's message? You forget we actually saw the picture of my relative painted without the aid of a human hand."

"Did the picture closely resemble your cousin?" inquired Mr. Parker.

"Oh, yes, indeed. It looked exactly as I saw him many years ago."

"Isn't that rather odd?" demanded Penny. "One would expect Cousin David to age a little."

"Penny believes that a photographer's agent who came here a few days ago was sent by Gepper to obtain a picture of your relative," explained Mr. Parker. "Did the man ask you many questions about your cousin?"

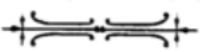
"Well, yes, he did," Mrs. Weems admitted unwillingly. "I made a mistake giving him the photograph."

"It seems fairly evident that the picture was used by Gepper," Mr. Parker commented. "Whether he plotted to steal your money remains to be proven. Penny, you saw the man plainly?"

"No, I didn't, Dad. Not his face. He was about the same build as Gepper."

"That's not much to go on."

"From the first Gepper was determined to get Mrs. Weems' money, Dad. He sent a man here who pretended to be from the Bierkamp Investment Company."



"You didn't tell me that," said Mrs. Weems.

"Well, no I didn't. I was afraid you would invest your money with him, so I drove the man away. He must have been Gepper's accomplice. Failing to acquire the money by that means, he plotted the burglary."

"Surely you don't agree with Penny?" the housekeeper asked Mr. Parker unhappily.

"In general, I am afraid I do. Mr. Gepper is an undesirable character, and I should like nothing better than to send him to jail."

"Come upstairs, Mrs. Weems," urged Penny. "I'll show you the desk."

Both the housekeeper and Mr. Parker followed her to the second floor. An examination of the bedroom disclosed no additional clues, but after studying the marks on the window ledge, the publisher favored Penny's theory that a silk ladder had been utilized.

"It was unwise of me to keep my money here," Mrs. Weems remarked in a
crestfallen tone. "I--I've been silly about everything, I guess."

Penny gave her a quick hug. "No, you haven't. Anyone might have been taken in by Al Gepper."

"I shall never attend another of his seances. I'll urge Mrs. Hodges to turn him from her house."

"Mrs. Weems, are you willing to help get evidence against him?" asked Mr. Parker abruptly.

"Why, yes, if I can."

"Then go to the Hodges' exactly as you have in the past," instructed the publisher. "Penny has been warned by Gepper not to attend any of the seances, but you'll still be welcome. Learn everything you can and report to me."

"I'll be glad to do it, Mr. Parker."

"Don't allow him to guess that you have become suspicious. Above all, never withdraw your money from the bank at his suggestion."

"You may be sure I won't. This has taught me a bitter lesson."

"Haven't you an assignment for me, Dad?" inquired Penny. "How about Kano's Curio Shop?"

"Early tomorrow I'll send Jerry there to question the old Jap."

"Will you notify the police?"

"Not for the present. If we can crack this story I'd like to get it ahead of the _Record_."

"I wish you would send me to Kano's instead of Jerry."

"Dorr Street is no place for you, Penny," Mr. Parker replied, dismissing the matter. "Shall we get to bed now? It's nearly midnight."

After the doors had been locked once more Penny went to her room, but she did not immediately fall asleep. Instead, she kept mulling over the events of the night. The more she thought about it the more firmly she became convinced that both the Kohl home and her own had been entered by the same person.

"The telephone was ringing when I came from the movie," she recalled. "Now I wonder who called? It may have been a trick of the thief to learn if anyone were in the house. When no one answered, the assumption would be that the coast was clear."

Penny felt rather well satisfied with the way matters had developed. In one bold stroke she had saved Mrs. Weems' inheritance, convinced the housekeeper that Al Gepper was not to be trusted, and had made definite progress in gaining evidence to be used in her father's campaign against the charlatan invaders of Riverview. Yet it annoyed her that the story, now that it had reached an active stage, was to be turned over to Jerry.

"I have a notion to visit the Kano Curio Shop ahead of him," she thought. "That's exactly what I'll do!"

Having made up her mind, she rolled over and promptly fell asleep.

In the morning Penny ate breakfast and wiped the dishes with a speed which astonished Mrs. Weems. Shortly after her father left for the office, she backed her own maroon car from the garage, and offering only a vague explanation, departed for Kano's Curio Shop.

Dorr Street was quite deserted at such an early hour, and the Japanese shop owner had just unlocked his doors. He was sweeping the floor as Penny boldly entered.

"Good morning, Mr. Kano," she greeted him. "You remember me, I believe?"

Mr. Kano bowed, regarding her warily. "Yes," he replied. "You are the young lady whose curiosity is very large."

Penny smiled. "You are right, Mr. Kano. It is very large, especially about a certain silken ladder."

Mr. Kano frowned as he leaned on his broom. "I am very sorry," he said.

"I am a merchant, not one who answers what you call the quiz-bee."

Penny understood that the Japanese never would tell her what she wished to know save under compulsion. She decided to adopt firm tactics.

"Mr. Kano," she said, "my father is the owner of the _Riverview Star_ and he intends to expose certain crooks who have been robbing wealthy persons such as the Kohls. You read in the paper that their home was entered?"

"Yes, I read," the Japanese shrugged.

"My own theory is that the thief gained entrance by means of a silk ladder," Penny declared. "_A ladder made in this shop!"

The shopkeeper's eyes narrowed. "I know nothing," he replied. "Nothing. You go now, please."

"If I go," said Penny, "I'll return with the police. You would not like that, I take it?" Her voice was crisp and full of menace.

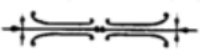
Mr. Kano lost some of his poise. "No!" he answered sharply. "I am an honest man and want no sad trouble with the police."

Chancing to glance toward the street, Penny observed Jerry Livingston standing on the opposite corner. He was gazing thoughtfully toward the Curio Shop, and she knew that he must have been sent by her father to interview Mr. Kano. Inspired, she turned again to the old Japanese.

"You see that young man yonder?" she asked, indicating Jerry. "I have but to summon him and he'll come here."

"Detective?" demanded Mr. Kano, peering anxiously through the window. "Do not call him! I am an honest man. I will answer your questions."

"Then tell me about the silken ladder."



"I know little," the shopkeeper insisted. "I made the rope for a man who said: 'Do this or we will burn your shop down, Mr. Kano.' So I made the ladder and he paid me well for fashioning it."

"And what was the man's name?"

"His name I do not know. But his eyes were small and evil. His skin was dark, his nose crooked."

Mr. Kano ceased speaking with an abruptness which caused Penny to glance toward the door. Her first thought was that Jerry had entered. Instead a strange young man stood there, regarding her suspiciously.

As she stared at him he quickly retreated, but not before she had caught a fleeting impression of a face which matched Mr. Kano's description with startling accuracy.

"Was he the one?" she demanded as the door slammed. "The man for whom you made the ladder?"

"No, no!" denied the Japanese.

His words failed to convince Penny. Darting to the door, she saw that the young man already was far down the street, walking rapidly.

"He is the one," she thought. "I'll follow him."

"Wait," called the Japanese as she started away, "I have more to tell you."

It was a ruse to detain her, Penny knew. Pushing past the shopkeeper who sought to bar the exit, she reached the street and ran toward Jerry Livingston.

"Why, Penny!" he exclaimed in surprise. "What are you doing in this part of town?"

"Never mind that," she answered hastily. "If you're after a story, come along with me. We're trailing the man who just left Kano's Shop."

CHAPTER 18 THE BELL TOWER

Jerry fell into step with Penny. As they walked along, she told him of her conversation with Mr. Kano.

"I believe this man we're following is the same one who entered our house last night," she declared. "He's the same build as the fellow I grabbed. Besides, he fits Kano's description of the person who bought the silken ladder."

"Here's hoping you're right," replied Jerry. "If I muff this assignment, I may wake up looking for another job."

Fearing that the man ahead would discover he was being followed, Jerry and Penny dropped farther and farther behind. Presently they saw him enter a pawnshop.

"I know that place," commented Jerry. "It's run by Spike Weiser, a notorious _fence_. He buys stolen goods and gets rid of it at a profit. Has a swell home on Clarmont Drive."

"Why don't the police arrest him?"

"Oh, they watch the place, but Spike is too smart to be caught. He has a system for handling _hot_ goods."

"I'll venture some of the Kohl loot was sold through him, Jerry."

"It wouldn't surprise me. But if the police search the place they won't find a thing."

Loitering on the opposite side of the street, Penny and the reporter kept close watch of the pawnbroker's shop. Thirty

minutes elapsed. The man whom they had trailed, did not reappear.

"He must have slipped out the back door," Jerry remarked. "Probably knew he was being watched."

"I'm beginning to think so myself."

Jerry glanced at his watch. "I can't take any more time," he said. “I'll have to get back to the office."

"I'll watch a few minutes longer," answered Penny. "If anything develops I'll try to telephone."

Jerry walked hurriedly away. Scarcely had he disappeared when the door of the pawnshop opened, and the young man who had entered a half hour earlier, appeared. Penny hastily moved back into the vestibule of an office building.

Without observing her, the stranger crossed the street and walked briskly toward an intersecting boulevard. There was no opportunity for Penny to telephone the _Star_ office. Following, she was hard pressed to keep theman within view.

Not until they reached the entrance of Butternut Lane did it dawn uponher that the Celestial Temple might be their destination. Then, indeed, her pulse stepped up a pace.

"It's exactly as I guessed!" she thought triumphantly. "He's connected with Al Gepper and the other mediums!"

Not wishing to attract attention in the deserted lane, Penny took a short cut through the cemetery, emerging at the rear of the Celestial Temple. There was no door on that side of the building but a window had been leftraised. Placed beneath it, as if for her particular convenience, was a large rock.

Penny stood on it, peering into the Temple. The room was unoccupied.
However, as she waited, the same man she had trailed, quietly let himself

in through the front entrance, using a key. He glanced about and called in a low voice: "Pete! Pete! Anyone here?"

There was no answer, which seemed to please the young man. He moved quickly down the aisle, crossed the platform to a door which opened into the bell tower. Kneeling he began to fit keys into the lock, seeking one which would serve.

As Penny watched, the young man suddenly straightened. Apparently he had heard footsteps in the vestibule for he moved away from the bell tower door.

A middle-aged woman with dyed hair and a skin of unusual pallor entered the Temple. She stopped short as she saw the young man.

"You here, Slippery?" she commented, gazing at him with distrust. "Where's Pete?"

"Hello, Sade. I was wonderin' about Pete myself. Just got here a minute ago."

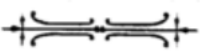
The woman's gaze fastened upon the key which had been left in the bell tower door.

"Say, what's coming off here?" she demanded. "You were trying to get inside!"

"Now don't ruffle your feathers, Sade," the man said soothingly. "I was only testing the door to make sure it was locked."

"I'll bet! You were aiming to break in! Slippery, they sure named you right. Why, you'd double-cross your own mother!"

"Oh, quiet down," the man retorted angrily. "I only came here to make sure Pete was on the job. The lazy loafer has skipped out and left the place unguarded."



The woman deliberately seated herself in a chair beside the bell tower
door.

"I'm parking here until Pete shows up," she announced. "Maybe you're on the square, Slippery, but I don't trust you."

"Thanks for your flattering opinion," the man responded mockingly. “You give me a pain, Sade. I do all the dangerous work, and what do I get? A measly ten per cent."

"Plus what you stick in your pocket when you're on a job," the woman shot back with rising anger. "You've been doing pretty well for yourself, Slippery--you and Al. But the boys are getting wise. From now on it may not be so easy. Better play fair with the rest of us--or else."

"You always did have a wagging tongue," the man retorted. "Always trying to stir up trouble. Don't you realize we've got to work together or we’ll be jailed separately? Our ranks must be united."

"Gettin' sort of jittery, ain't you?"

"Maybe you haven't been reading those editorials in the Star_."

"Sure, I read them and get a big laugh. This guy Parker has to blow off steam. Nothing will come of it."

"The police have visited this place once already."

"And what did they find? Nothing."

"That's no guarantee they won't try again. I tell you this town is getting too hot for comfort."

"Figurin' on blowing?" the woman inquired, watching him shrewdly.

Slippery's laughter had an unpleasant edge. "You sure do get ideas, Sade.

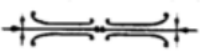
Don't start peddling that line of talk. Understand?"

"I hear."

Suddenly losing his temper, the man strode nearer, seizing her arm.

"Just start something and see where you wake up!" he said harshly. “One word to Pete or any of the boys and you won't do any more pretty fortune telling!"

The woman jerked her arm free, gazing at the man in sullen silence. Nor did she speak as he left the Temple, slamming the door behind him.



CHAPTER 19
PENNY INVESTIGATES

Penny debated whether or not to follow Slippery. Deciding that she should try to keep him within sight, she abandoned her post beneath the window and ran to the front of the building.

Already the young man was far down the lane, walking rapidly. Before Penny could overtake him he hailed a taxi and drove away. By the time she obtained another cab, pursuit was futile.

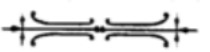
"To the _Star_ office," Penny ordered the driver.

Although Slippery had eluded her, she did not feel that her morning's work had been wasted. She believed that her father would be very much interested in a report of her findings.

"It's evident that Slippery is connected with Al Gepper and various mediums of the Celestial Temple," she reflected. "I am sure, too, that he's the one who broke into our house, but to prove it may not be so easy."

Penny had not fully understood the conversation which she had overheard between Slippery and Sade. That they distrusted each other was evident, but why had the woman feared Slippery might break into the bell tower during the guard's absence?

"Something of great value to the organization must be kept there," she reasoned. "But what can it be?"



Penny believed that her father would not delay in requesting police to search the bell tower of the Celestial Temple. However, a disappointment awaited her.

Upon arriving at the newspaper office DeWitt stopped her as she went past his desk.

"Don't go in there," he said, jerking his thumb toward Mr. Parker's private room.

"Why not?" asked Penny in surprise. "Is Dad having a conference?"

DeWitt nodded as he composed a two column headline. "With J. P. Henley."

"The _Star's_ Sugar Daddy?"

"Our biggest advertiser. He's threatening to go over to the -Record."

"Why, that's serious!"

"It is if he quits the _Star_. The old man--Mr. Parker--" DeWitt corrected hastily, "has been trying to soften him up for the past two hours. Whatever you do, don't bust in there now."

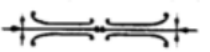
"I won't, Mr. DeWitt, but I did wish to see Dad."

"Anything I can do for you?"

Penny hesitated. "Well, I wanted to talk to him about something I learned today at the Celestial Temple."

"Oh, yes," nodded the city editor, his attention on a sheet of copy. "Mr. Parker is handling the campaign personally. Sorry I can't be of service."

Rather startled by DeWitt's unusual politeness, Penny glanced hopefully



toward Jerry Livingston's desk. It was littered with papers, but quite deserted.

With a sigh she left the building and walked to Dorr Street where she had left her maroon car. Upon reaching home she found that Mrs. Weems was not there and she had forgotten her own key. For a time she sat disconsolately on the front porch. Then she decided to go to the Hudell Garage where Leaping Lena had been left for repairs three days earlier.

The car was ready, and with it a bill for eight dollars and forty-two cents.

"I'll have to give you a dollar on account and pay the remainder next week," said Penny. "Or would you rather keep the car as a deposit?"

"Give me the dollar," said the garage man hastily.

Penny became even more depressed as she drove the automobile home. Not for the world would she openly admit that she had made amistake in repurchasing Lena. Secretly she acknowledged that two cars were an unbearable financial drain upon slender resources.

Turning into her own street, Penny saw Mrs. Weems walking toward home, and stopped for her.

"I've just come from the Hodges'," the housekeeper commented, climbing into the car.

"You have?" inquired Penny eagerly. "Did you learn anything?"

"No, I didn't. Mr. Gepper seemed very unwilling to conduct another seance. He acted so different this time--almost as if he bore me a personal grudge."

"He's probably provoked because your inheritance eluded him."

"He did tell Mrs. Hodges that he doubted I had any money," Mrs. Weems responded.

"What happened at the seance?"

"Why, nothing. The table moved and we heard a few raps. That was all."

"No message from Cousin David?"

"Not a word or a sign. Mr. Gepper seemed very indifferent about it all. He said he couldn't give me another appointment unless I paid for it."

"What do you think about him now?" Penny asked curiously. "Don't you agree with Dad and me that he was after your money?"

"Yes, I was very silly," the housekeeper acknowledged. "Mrs. Hodges has begun to lose faith in him, too. She says he's been bringing all sorts of folks to her place. When she told him she didn't care to have the house over-run with strangers, he became very unpleasant."

"You mean he threatened her?"

"In a mild way. He told her that he would stay as long as he pleased and she could do nothing about it. Mrs. Hodges is afraid to go to the police for fear she'll be arrested with Mr. Gepper."

"I wonder if he ever has charged for his seances?" Penny said thoughtfully.

"I am sure he has, Penny. Of course I have no proof."

"Mrs. Weems, you must go there again this afternoon," Penny urged.

"Insist upon another seance, and pay him for it! Then you'll be able to testify as a witness against him!"

"But I don't wish to go into court," the housekeeper protested. “Besides, Mr. Gepper won't be at the cottage this afternoon."

"Where is he going?" Penny questioned alertly.

"I don't know. I heard him tell Mrs. Hodges he would be gone this afternoon, but would return for an eight o'clock seance."

"Why, that's fine--wonderful!" chuckled Penny.

Mrs. Weems gazed at the girl with sudden suspicion. "Now what have you thought up?" she demanded.

"Nothing alarming," grinned Penny. "I merely plan to visit Mr. Gepper’s studio during his absence. Who knows, I may yet master a few of the finer points of ghost-making!"

CHAPTER 20
INSIDE THE CABINET

Despite Mrs. Weems' protests, Penny remained firm in her decision to investigate Mr. Gepper's studio. She ate a belatedly prepared lunch and did not reach the Hodges' cottage until nearly four o'clock, having driven there in Lena.

The doors were closed and Penny knocked several times without receiving a response.

"Everyone must have gone away," she thought. "Oh, dear, now what shall I do?"

Penny reasoned that it was of vital importance for her to inspect Al Gepper's room during his absence. She might never have another opportunity. Yet she hesitated to enter the house while the Hodges were away, even though she felt certain the seamstress would not mind.

Walking to the rear, Penny noticed that the porch screen had been left unfastened. Entering the kitchen, she called Mrs. Hodges' name but received no answer.

"If I wait for her to come home it may be too late," decided Penny. “This is an emergency."

Her mind made up, she took the stairs two at a time to Al Gepper's room. Her knock went unanswered. Satisfied that he was not there, she tried the door and found it unlocked.

Penny raised a blind to flood light into the darkened room. Save that a film of dust covered the furniture, everything was approximately the same as she had last seen it.

Her gaze fell upon two suitcases which had been pushed beneath the bed. The first contained only miscellaneous clothing. The second merited a more careful inspection.

Almost at once Penny came upon an old faded picture, the one of Cousin David which Mrs. Weems had given to the photographer's "agent."

"So that was how it was done!" she thought. "Al Gepper sent one of his confederates to see Mrs. Weems and obtain information about her cousin. The painting which appeared so miraculously during the seance was merely a copy of this! Even so, how was it painted so quickly?"

Forgetting the picture for a moment, Penny picked up several newspaper clippings which were fastened together with a rubber band. All had been taken from the obituary column and concerned the death of well-to-do Riverview persons.

"Al Gepper and his pals are ghouls!" Penny told herself. "They prey upon the relatives of persons who have died, realizing that at such a time it will be much easier to interest them in trying to communicate with the departed!"

Lifting a tray from the suitcase, her attention focused upon a small red booklet. As she turned rapidly through it, a folded sheet of paper fell to the floor.

Examining it, Penny saw a long list of names, together with pertinent information about each person. Not only was the address and financial standing of the individual given, but the deceased relatives in each family and other facts of a personal nature. The list had been mimeographed.

"This must be a 'sucker' list!" thought Penny. "No wonder it's easy for a medium to find victims and tell them astonishing facts."

Thrusting the paper into her pocket, she turned her attention to the wardrobe closet. Al Gepper's clothes hung in orderly

rows from the hangers. Behind them, half hidden from view, was a small box.

Pulling it to the window, Penny examined the contents. There were many bottles filled with chemicals, the names of which were unfamiliar. She noted a bottle of varnish, another of zinc white, and some photographic paper in a sealed envelope.

A glance satisfying her, she replaced the box and next turned her attention to the cabinet behind the large circular table. Here she was richly rewarded as her gaze fell upon a banjo. "The same one which played during Mrs. Weems' seance!" she thought. “We were able to see it in the dark because it's covered with luminous paint. But what made it rise into the air, and how could it play without the aid of human hands?"

Penny examined the instrument closely. She chuckled as she discovered a tiny phonograph with a record built into its back side. As she pressed a control lever, it began a stringed version of "Down Upon the Swanee River."

Quickly turning it off, she inspected other objects in the cabinet. At once she found a rod which could be extended to a height of five feet.

"That's how the banjo was raised!" she reasoned. "And by use of this rod it would be easy to make a ghost appear to float high overhead. This luminous material must have been used."

Penny picked up a filmy robe, shaking out the many folds. While it was clear to her that Al Gepper had employed the garment to materialize the so-called spirit of Cousin David, she could only guess how he had made it enlarge from a mere spot to a full sized figure.

"He must have wadded the cloth in his hand, and held it above his head,” she mused. "Then he could have slowly shaken it out until it covered his entire body. Thus the figure would appear to grow in size."

In one corner of the cabinet Penny came upon a luminous slate.

"This was used for Cousin David's message," she thought. "Al probably had an assistant who wrote on it and thrust it through the curtain."

While many questions remained unanswered, Penny had obtained sufficient evidence to indicate that Al Gepper was only a clever trickster. Greatly elated, she decided to hasten to the _Star_ office to report her findings.

Noticing that she had neglected to return the two suitcases to their former places, Penny pushed them under the bed again. As she straightened, a door slammed on the lower floor.

For an instant she hoped that it was Mrs. Hodges or her husband who had come home. Then she heard footsteps on the stairs, and their rapidity warned her that they could belong only to a young person.

Frantically, she gazed about the room. The cabinet seemed to offer the safest hiding place. Slipping into it, she pulled the black curtain across the opening.

CHAPTER 21
STARTLING INFORMATION

Scarcely had Penny hidden herself when Al Gepper entered the room. With him was the hook-nosed young man known as Slippery.

"I tell you, Al," the latter was saying, "this town is getting too hot for comfort. We've got to blow."

"It was that Parker girl who queered everything," muttered Gepper. “How could I know that her father was a newspaper publisher? He's stirred up folks with his editorials."

"You never should have let her in here. We had a swell set-up, but now we can expect a raid any day."

"I tell you I thought she was just a smart-aleck kid, a friend of the Hodges'. Didn't learn until yesterday who she was."

"We've got to blow, Al. Sade's threatening to make trouble, too. She thinks we're holding out on the others."

"We have picked up a little extra coin now and then."

"Sure, Al, but we've always been the brains of the outfit. We take most of the risk, plan all the big jobs, so why shouldn't we have more?"

"It's time we cut loose from 'em, Slippery."

"Now you're talking! But we can't pull out until the Henley job comes off. I've had a tip that the house is likely to be deserted tonight. Let's make the haul and then skip."

"Okay," agreed Gepper. "I have some suckers coming for a seance at eight. I'll get rid of them in quick time, and be waiting. So long, Slippery."

A door slammed, telling Penny that the hook-nosed man had left. She was somewhat stunned by what she had overheard, believing that the Henley who had been mentioned must be her father's chief advertiser.

Nervously she waited inside the cabinet, wishing that she might take her information to the police. To her intense annoyance, Al Gepper did not leave the room even for a moment.

Instead he threw himself on the bed and read a tabloid newspaper. After an hour, he arose and began to prepare his supper on an electric grill.

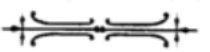
Penny shifted from one position to another, growing more impatient. Every time the man came toward the cabinet her heart beat a trifle faster. She was quite sure the Hodges had not yet returned home, and should Al Gepper discover her, he would not treat her kindly.

The medium finished his supper and stacked the dishes in the closet without washing them. Then he started to get ready for the night's seance.

Peeping from between the cracks of the curtain, Penny saw him seat himself before the easel. With painstaking care he painted a picture of a woman, using a photograph as a model. After a coating of varnish had been applied, he allowed it to dry and afterwards covered the entire picture with zinc white. The original painting was entirely hidden.

Penny knew that hours had elapsed. The room gradually darkened, and Al Gepper turned on the lights.

"Oh, dear, I must get out of here soon!" the girl thought desperately. "But if I make a break for it he'll be sure to see me. That will ruin all my plans.



Eight o'clock came. Al Gepper put on his coat, combed his hair and was alertly waiting when the doorbell rang. However, instead of descending the stairs he shouted an invitation for the visitors to come up.

Two women in their early forties were ushered into the seance chamber, to be followed almost immediately by an elderly man.

"We will start at once if you please," said Al Gepper brusquely. "I have another engagement tonight. However, before the seance is undertaken I must ask that each of you pay the required fee, five dollars."

The money was paid, and the three persons seated themselves at the table. Gepper switched off the lights.

The seance began in much the same manner as the one Penny had attended. The medium called upon the spirit of a woman named Flora to appear.

"Now concentrate hard--everyone," he instructed. "Flora, where are you? Can you not show yourself that we may know it is truly your spirit which communicates with us?"

From the cabinet, so close to Al Gepper that she could have touched his hand, Penny was able to see his every move. Yet so swift was his next action, that she barely discerned it.
Taking a wet sponge from his pocket he wiped it across the painting previously prepared. The picture immediately became visible to the audience as Gepper focused his flashlight on the canvas.

"That wasn't the way he made Mrs. Weems' picture appear," thought Penny.

"The fellow must have a great repertoire of tricks!"

The seance had become so interesting that she no longer thought of escape. Nevertheless, she came to a sudden realization of her precarious

position as she heard the medium say that he would next endeavor to persuade the Spirit of Flora to take actual shape. With a shock it dawnedupon her that in another moment the man would enter the cabinet to makeuse of the luminous gauze robe and other paraphernalia.

Knowing that she could not hide from him, Penny decided upon a bold break for freedom. Dropping the ghostly robe over her face and shoulders, she pulled aside the dark curtain and flitted into the room.

Her dramatic entrance brought gasps of astonishment from the persons who sat at the circular table. The medium, as dumbfounded as his audience muttered: "What the dickens!" and pushed back his chair, his legs rasping on the floor.

Penny did not linger, but darted past the group and groped for the door. In the darkness she could not immediately find it. Her shining robe, on the other hand, made her an easy target for Al Gepper.

Angrily the medium strode across the room, seizing her arm. She jerked away, but he grasped a fold of the robe. It tore and was left behind.

At that critical instant, Penny's hand encountered the door. She swung it open, and bounded down the stairway.

In the seance chamber a light went on, then the hallway became brilliantly illuminated. But by that time the girl was in the dining room.

She could hear Al Gepper clattering down the steps, intent upon capturing her. Penny was determined that he should never learn her identity.

Letting herself out of the house by way of the kitchen door, she decided that if she attempted to cross the yard, the medium certainly would recognize her. The woodpile offered a hiding place and she crouched behind it.

Scarcely had she secreted herself, when Al Gepper ran into the yard. He glanced about carefully and circled the house twice.

Finally, convinced that the "ghost" had escaped he came back to the porch. His customers, greatly agitated by what had occurred, were demanding explanations.

"Someone played a prank," Gepper explained briefly. "It will be impossible to resume the seance for the spirits are offended. You will leave, please."

The customers departed and the medium locked himself in the house. He did not bother to lower the upstairs hall blind, and Penny caught occasional glimpses of him as he moved to and fro.

"He's packing to leave!" she observed. "Unless I act in double-quick time, he'll skip town! I must notify Dad and the police without an instant's delay!"

CHAPTER 22
SCALING THE WALL

The nearest drugstore with a public telephone was two blocks away. Pennyran the distance, and slipping into the booth, she dialed the _Star office. Informed by the building switchboard operator that neither her father nor DeWitt was available, she inquired for Jerry Livingston, and to her relief was connected with him.

"Listen, Jerry, this is Penny!" she began excitedly. "I haven't time to explain, but the lid is blowing off the fake spiritualist story! Rush the police out to the Hodges' cottage and demand Al Gepper's arrest! Send another squad or some private detectives to Mr. Henley's home."

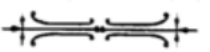
"Henley!" Jerry exclaimed. "Say, have you gone loco?"

"I'm not making any mistakes," Penny replied tersely. "If you act quickly we may prevent a robbery. I'm on my way there now to warn Mr. Henley! Oh, yes, try to find Dad or DeWitt and warn them a big story is breaking!"

"Penny, what's this all about?" the reporter demanded. "I can't go to the police unless I know what I am doing."

"You must, Jerry. I have plenty of evidence against Gepper and his crowd, but unless you take the police to the Hodges' in the next fifteen minutes it will be too late!"

Without giving Jerry opportunity to delay her with other questions, Penny hung up the receiver. Hastening to the



street, she gazed frantically about for a taxi. None was to be had.

"I'll get to the Henley place quicker in Lena than by waiting for a cab to come along," she thought.

The battered old car had been parked a short distance from the Hodges' cottage. Hurrying there, Penny jumped into the ancient vehicle and started the motor. As usual it made a loud clatter, but she did not suspect that the sound carried far up the street. Nor did she guess that Al Gepper stood at the darkened window of his room, watching her.

Penny drove as fast as she could to the Henley home in the southern section of Riverview. Lights blazed from the downstairs windows.

Abandoning her car in the driveway, she rang the doorbell. After a long wait, a maid appeared.

"Is Mr. Henley here?" Penny asked breathlessly. "Or Mrs. Henley? It's most important that I talk with them at once."

"Mrs. Henley has been at the seashore for a month," the maid replied in an agitated voice. "Mr. Henley is somewhere downtown. I've been trying to get him, but the telephone wire has been cut!"

"The house hasn't been robbed?"

"Mrs. Henley's jewelry has been taken! I don't know what else."

"When did it happen?" Penny asked.

"It must have been during the last half hour. I went to the corner store for a book of stamps. When I came back five minutes ago I discovered what had occurred. I ought to call the police, but I am afraid to do it until I've talked with my employer."

"The police already have been notified," said Penny. "They'll be here any minute."

"But how did you know--?" the maid began in astonishment.

Penny had turned away. She was convinced that the burglary had been committed by Slippery. Perhaps, by this time he had fled town, but she did not believe he would leave without his pal, Al Gepper.

Climbing into the car again, Penny debated. It was reasonable to suppose that, having accomplished the burglary, Slippery would return to the Hodges' cottage to meet the medium.

"If he does, the police should be on hand to seize him," she thought. “At least, he and Al will be held for questioning. But there's one place I forgot to cover--the Celestial Temple."

Like a flash came the recollection that Slippery had been deeply interested in something which was guarded in the bell tower. Was it not possible that he might return there before leaving Riverview?

Shifting gears, Penny turned the car and headed for Butternut Lane. Anxiously, she glanced at the gasoline gauge. It registered less than a gallon of fuel and she had used her last dime in the telephone booth.

"If I coast on all the downgrades I should just make it," she estimated.

In starting for the Celestial Temple Penny was acting upon a "hunch."
However, it disturbed her that the Henley burglary had been accomplished, and she was afraid she might again be wasting precious time. Now that it was too late, she wondered if it would not have been wiser to remain at the Hodges' cottage until the police arrived.

"I only hope that end of the affair isn't bungled," she thought. “I'll never get over it if Al and Slippery both escape."

Penny had reached the entrance to Butternut Lane. Parking at the side of the road, she continued afoot toward the Celestial Temple.

From a distance the building appeared dark. However, as she drew closer she could distinguish a dim light. Inside the Temple, a stout man wearing a hat sat with his chair tilted against the door of the bell tower room.

"He must be the guard," thought Penny. "Probably the one they call Pete."

Suddenly she paused, retreating into a clump of elder bushes near the walk. From the direction of the cemetery a figure emerged. At first, all that Penny could distinguish was a man carrying a suitcase. As he drew closer, her pulse quickened. Unmistakably, it was Slippery.

Without passing the bushes where the girl had taken refuge, the man walked on toward the Temple. Presently he halted. Glancing carefully about to assure himself that he was unobserved, he shoved his suitcase into the tall weeds which lined the walk. Then he moved to one of the Temple windows, peering into the gloomy interior.

"Now what?" thought Penny, watching alertly. "This should prove interesting."

Slippery remained beneath the window a minute or two. Instead of entering the Temple, he presently returned to the high weeds, stooping to remove some object from his suitcase. Hiding it under his coat, he circled the building and approached the side adjoining the cemetery.

Thoroughly mystified, Penny cautiously followed, taking care that her body cast no shadow which would attract Slippery's attention.

The man seemed deeply engrossed in the task he had set for himself. From his coat he took a collapsible rod which he

extended to the approximate length of a fish pole. To its end he attached a trailing silken ladder.

Deftly the man raised the ladder until two metal hooks bit into a projection of the bell tower. He tested the ropes to make certain they would bear his weight then, with the agility of a cat, mounted the silken
rungs. Penny saw him disappear into the bell tower.

"Now why did he climb up there?" she asked herself. "He must be after something hidden in the belfry."

Penny knew that she was a long distance from police aid, but it was unthinkable that Slippery should be allowed to escape. Impulsively, she moved from her hiding place to the base of the tower.

Grasping the silken ladder, she gave it a quick jerk which dislodged the two iron hooks. Down it tumbled into her arms, leaving the man trapped in the turret.

"He'll never dare call for help when he discovers what has happened," reasoned Penny. "If he does, the guard, Pete, will have something to say!"

Rolling the ladder into a small bundle, she started across the clearing, intending to seek the nearest telephone. With no thought of lurking danger, she brushed past a clump of bushes. A hand reached out and grasped her arm.

Penny screamed in terror and tried to break free. The hand help her in a grip of steel.

As she struggled, her captor emerged from the shelter of leaves. It was Al Gepper.

"I thought I might find you here, my little one," he said grimly. "You have had your fun. Now you must pay, and the entertainment shall be mine!"

CHAPTER 23
A PRISONER IN THE BELFRY

Penny tried to scream, only to have Al Gepper clamp his hand over hermouth.

"None of that!" he said harshly. "Behave yourself or you'll get rough treatment."

Inside the Temple, lights suddenly were turned on, for the brief struggle had been heard by Pete. The squat, stupid-faced man appeared in the
doorway of the building, peering down the lane.

"Who's there?" he demanded suspiciously.

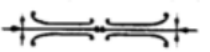
Al Gepper uttered an angry word beneath his breath. It was not to his liking that Pete should be drawn into the affair. However, he could not avoid detection.

"It's Al!" he called softly. "This girl broke up my seance tonight, and I trailed her here. She was prowling around the bell tower."

As he spoke, he dragged Penny toward the Temple entrance. His words convinced her that he had not observed her remove the silken ladder from the belfry wall, nor was he aware that Slippery was a prisoner in the tower.

"Let's have a look at her," said Pete. He flashed a light directly into Penny's face.

"She's the Parker girl--daughter of the publisher," informed Al.



"Yeah," commented Pete. "I saw her at one of our meetings. Another girl was with her. How much has she learned?"

"Enough to get us all run out of town. The question is, what shall we do with her?"

"Bring her inside, and we'll talk it over," said Pete. "Maybe we ought to call a meeting."

"No," replied Al Gepper impatiently, shoving Penny through the doorway. "We can take care of this ourselves."

The door was locked from the inside. Al pushed Penny into a chair on the front platform.

"Now sit there," he ordered. "One peep out of you and we'll tie you up and tape your mouth. Understand?"

"_Oui, oui, Monsieur_," said Penny, mockingly.

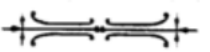
The two men stepped a few paces away and began to whisper together. Pete seemed to protest at Al's proposals.

Penny watched them uneasily, speculating upon their final decision. Whatever it was, she would never be given an opportunity to report to the police until it was too late to apprehend members of the Temple.

"I was stupid not to realize that Gepper might trail me," she told herself. "If only I had used an ounce of caution, I might have brought about the capture of the entire gang. Not to mention a grand scoop for Dad's paper."

Penny slumped lower in her chair. Her own predicament concerned her far less than the knowledge that she had bungled a golden opportunity.

Speculatively, her gaze shifted toward the bell tower room. The door was closed and she believed that it must be locked. There was no sound from the belfry, adding to her conviction that the man imprisoned there was fearful of attracting attention to his plight.



Al Gepper and Pete came toward her. With no explanation, the medium seized her arm and ordered her to walk toward the exit.

"Where are you taking me?" Penny asked.

"Never mind. You'll find out in good time."

"Wait!" exclaimed Penny, bracing her legs and refusing to be pushed. “If you'll let me go, I'll tell you something very much worth your while."

Deliberately, she allowed the silken ladder to slip from beneath her coat. The men would not have heeded her words, but the familiar object served its purpose.

"Where did you get that ladder?" demanded Al Gepper.

"So you would like to know what became of your friend, Slippery?” responded Penny evenly. "You'll be surprised when I tell you that he has double-crossed you both!"

"You're lying," accused Gepper.

Penny shrugged and did not speak.

"What were you going to say?" Gepper prodded in a moment.

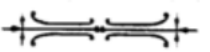
"Out with it!

How did you get Slippery's ladder?"

"It fell into my hands, literally and figuratively."

"Stalling for time will get you nowhere," snapped Gepper, losing patience. "If you know anything about Slippery spill it fast or you’ll not have another chance."

"Your friend tried to double-cross you," declared Penny. She decided to



make a shrewd guess. "Tonight, after he robbed the Henley home he came here intending to loot the bell tower."

"Why, the dirty sneak!" exclaimed Pete.

"Weren't you here on guard all evening?" Gepper demanded, turning to him.

"Sure, I was. I never set foot outside the building."

"Slippery wasn't here?"

"Haven't seen him since yesterday morning."

"Then the girl is lying!"

"Oh, no, the girl isn't," refuted Penny. "If you care for proof you'll find it in the tower."

"Proof?"

"I mean Slippery. He's hiding in the belfry now, hoping you'll not discover him there. You see, he scaled the wall by means of this silk ladder. I removed the ladder, and I assume he's still up there."

"Why, the low-down skunk!" Pete exclaimed wrathfully. "So he planned to rob us! I'll get him!"

Leaving Al to watch Penny, the guard ran to the tower room door and unlocked it. Stealthily he crept up the iron stairway which led to the belfry.

Suddenly those below heard a cry of rage, followed by the sound of scuffling. Al Gepper listened tensely, yet made no move to join the fight. He remained standing between Penny and the outside door.

"You were right," he admitted in a stunned voice. "Slippery's up there. He meant to get all the swag for himself."

The fight increased in intensity as the two men struggled on the belfry steps. Over and over they rolled, first one delivering a hard blow, and then the other. Still locked, they finally toppled to the floor, but even then Al Gepper remained a bystander.

Penny was less concerned with the fight than with thoughts of escape. She had hoped that Al, too, would join the battle. Apparently, he was taking no chance of letting her get away.

She considered attempting a sudden break for freedom, but immediately abandoned it. The outside door had been locked by Pete. Before she could turn the key, Al would be upon her. As for the windows, none were open. While they might not be locked, it was out of the question to reach one quickly enough.

Penny's gaze roved to the tower room once more, and the struggling men. High above their heads she saw something which previously had not drawn her attention. It was a loop of rope, hanging from the belfry.

"Why, that must be attached to the old church bell!" thought Penny. “If only I could reach it, I might be able to bring help here."

However, the rope dangled high overhead. Even if she were able to reach the room leading to the tower, there was nothing upon which she could stand to grasp the loop. Obviously the rope had been cut short years before to prevent anyone from ringing the bell.

Penny glanced toward Al Gepper. The medium's gaze was upon the two struggling men, not her. A golden opportunity presented itself, if only she had the wits to make use of it.

Almost at the girl's feet lay the tangle of silken ladder. As she stared at it, a sudden idea took possession of her. The iron hooks would serve her purpose, but dared she try it? If she failed--and the chances were against her--punishment would be certain.

Yet, if she did nothing and merely waited, it was likely that Al Gepper and his pals never would be brought to justice. She must take the chance, no matter how great the personal risk.

For a moment Penny remained inactive, planning what she must do. If she made a single mistake, fumbled at the critical instant, everything would be lost. Above all, her aim must be accurate. If she missed the loop--

Slippery and Pete were beginning to tire, their blows becoming futile and ineffective. Further delay in executing her plan only increased the danger. She must act now or never.

Her mind made up, Penny no longer hesitated. With a quick movement she seized the silken ladder and darted to the doorway of the bell tower.

"Hey!" shouted Al Gepper, starting after her.

Penny slammed the door in his face. Taking careful aim, she hurled the silken ladder upward. One of the iron hooks caught in the loop of the rope. She jerked on it, and to her joy, the bell began to ring.

CHAPTER 24
THE WOODEN BOX

Penny pulled the rope again and again, causing the huge bell to sway back and forth violently. It rang many times before Al Gepper succeeded in opening the tower room door.

His face was crimson with fury when he seized the girl, hurling her away from the rope. With one quick toss he released the hooks of the silken ladder, stuffing the soft strands beneath his coat. The bell made a final clang and became silent.

Penny retreated against the wall, anticipating severe punishment for her act. However, Al and his companions were more concerned with thoughts of escape than with her.

"We've got to get out of here," muttered Al. "Come on!"

The two men on the floor had ceased their struggles. Painfully they regained their feet. In this sudden emergency they had forgotten their differences.

"What shall we do about the box in the tower?" Pete demanded, nursing a swollen eye.

"Leave it here," returned Al. "We can't save anything now. The police are apt to swoop down on us any minute."

Turning, he fled to the street. Pete and Slippery hesitated, then followed. Penny heard a key turn in the lock. Even before she tested the door she knew she had been imprisoned in the tower room.

"They've escaped after all," she thought dismally. "But I may have saved some of the loot. I'll take a look."

Quickly she climbed the iron stairs to the belfry. From the turret she obtained a perfect view of the entire Lane. Al Gepper was running down the street, while Pete and Slippery had turned toward the cemetery.

There were no other persons in the vicinity, Penny thought at first glance. Then her heart leaped as she saw three men entering the Lane at its junction with the main street. They, too, were running.

"They must have heard the bell!" she told herself. "Oh, if only I can make them understand what has happened!"

Her best means of attracting attention was by ringing the bell. She pushed against it and was rewarded by a deafening clang.

The men stopped short, staring toward the belfry. Penny cupped her hands and shouted. Her words did not carry plainly, but the newcomers seemed to gain an inkling of what was amiss, for they wheeled and began to pursue the two who had taken refuge in the cemetery.

From her high perch, Penny saw Al Gepper nearing the end of the Lane, unobserved by all save herself. Tapping the bell again, she called:

"Get him, too! At the end of the street!"

One of the pursuers halted, turning toward the tower. In the moonlight Penny saw his face and recognized Jerry Livingston. He was close enough now to hear her voice.

"It's Al Gepper!" she shouted. "Don't let him escape!"

The reporter turned, but as he started off in the new direction, both he and Penny saw the fleeing man climbing into Leaping Lena. With a grinding of gears, he drove away. Jerry stopped, thinking that he never could overtake the car.

"Keep after him, Jerry!" encouraged Penny. "The gas tank is almost empty. He can't possibly go more than three or four blocks!"

As the reporter again took up the chase, she began tolling the bell once more, determined to arouse everyone within a mile of the Temple.

Her energy was rewarded, for in another minute she heard the familiar wail of a siren. A police cruiser swerved alongside the tower, stopping with a lurch.

"What's the idea of ringing that bell?" demanded an officer, leaping to the ground.

Tersely Penny explained the situation. The two policemen took a short-cut through a vacant lot, circling the cemetery. Darkness swallowed them, but presently there came a muffled command to halt, followed by a revolver shot.

So excited was Penny that she nearly tumbled from the bell tower. Recovering her balance, she sat on the stone ledge, trying to remain calm. Her nerves were jumpy and on edge.

"If only Jerry captures Al Gepper--that's all I ask!" she breathed.

As the minutes elapsed, it occurred to her that she had not yet searched for the loot which she believed to be hidden in the belfry. With questing fingers she groped beneath the ledge. For a short distance she felt
nothing. Then she encountered a long wooden box.

Before she could open it, she heard shouts from the direction of the cemetery. Four men, two of them police officers, were marching Slippery and Pete toward the Temple. As they came nearer she received another pleasant surprise. The two who had aided in the capture were her father and Salt Sommers, a photographer for the _Star_.

"Dad!" shouted Penny. "Can you get me down from this pigeon roost?"

Mr. Parker, separating from the others, came to the foot of the bell tower.

"So it was you who sounded the alarm!" he exclaimed. "I might have known! How did you get up there?"

"I'm locked in. Dad, send the police to help Jerry. He's after Al Gepper who rode off in my car."

The police cruiser was dispatched, leaving one officer to guard the two prisoners. Mr. Parker unlocked the door of the tower room, releasing his daughter.

"You're all right?" he asked anxiously.

"Of course. Here's a little present for you." Penny thrust the wooden box into his hands.

"What's this?"

"I don't know yet. I found it hidden in the belfry."

"Penny, if you fell into a river you would come up with a chest of gold!" exclaimed the publisher admiringly.

"Open it quick, Dad."

Mr. Parker required no urging. The box was locked but he pried off the cover hinges, exposing the contents.

"A real treasure!" exclaimed Penny.

The box contained several bracelets, one of them set with rubies and diamonds, countless rings, four watches, and several strings of matched pearls.

"Stolen loot!" ejaculated the publisher.

"And what a collection!" chuckled Penny as she examined the separate pieces. "There's enough plunder here to start a jewelry store."

"Likewise sufficient evidence to put this Celestial Temple gang out of circulation for a long, long time," added her father.

"I learned a lot tonight, Dad. Wait until I tell you!"

"A scoop for the _Star_?"

"You'll be able to use your largest, blackest headlines."

Penny began to tell her story, interrupting only when Slippery and Pete were brought into the building handcuffed together. Starting again, she made her charges, accusing Slippery not only of having committed the Henley burglary, but also of having robbed the Kohls and many prominent Riverview families.

After inspecting the jewelry found in the wooden box, one of the police officers definitely identified several of the pieces as stolen goods. He expressed an opinion that the jewelry had been hidden in the belfry because it was too "hot" to be disposed of by fences.

"The organization members had an agreement by which all shared in the loot," added Penny. "That caused trouble. Al Gepper and Slippery thought they were taking most of the risk without sufficient return. So they pulled a few extra jobs of their own."

Before she could reveal more, the police car was heard outside the Temple. From the window Penny saw that Jerry and the policeman were returning with Al Gepper who had been handcuffed.

"They've caught him!" she cried jubilantly.

The prisoner was brought into the Temple to be identified. He had been captured when Leaping Lena had stalled for lack of gasoline.

As Gepper was searched, the silken ladder, and various small objects were removed from his coat. Penny noticed two tiny rubber suction cups no larger than dimes, and immediately made up her mind that later she would try to obtain them. She was quite certain she knew their purpose.

Penny told her story and learned, in turn, that after she had telephoned Jerry, he had traced her father, and with the police both had hastened to the Hodges' cottage. Arriving there, they discovered that Gepper had fled. Jerry, Mr. Parker, and Salt Sommers had immediately proceeded to the Celestial Temple.

"It was lucky you rang that bell, Penny," chuckled Jerry. "If you hadn't, we never would have arrived here in time."

"It was lucky, too, that Mr. Gepper tried to escape in Lena," she laughed. "I guess my old rattle-trap has redeemed itself."

One of the officers picked up the silken ladder, examining it with critical interest. He agreed that it had undoubtedly been used in many mysterious burglaries committed during the past month.

"It's obvious that Slippery approached the houses on the 'blind' side, and scaled the wall after hooking his ladder into a window ledge," Penny remarked. "I suppose he reasoned that second-story windows nearly always are left unlocked. But how did he learn the houses were deserted? By telephoning?"

"That would be my opinion," nodded the policeman. "If someone answered, he could hang up. Otherwise, he would be fairly sure the house was empty."

"One night at the theatre I saw a man who resembled Slippery noting down the license number of the Kohl car. But

the house was robbed within a few hours after that. How could he have obtained the name and address?"

"Easily. There are 'information fences' who supply such data to fellow members of the underworld. It is also possible that Slippery previously had watched the Kohl house, obtained the car license number, and then watched for it later at the theatre."

Jerry already had supplied police with the name of the fence whose establishment Slippery had visited earlier in the day. Later, a raid staged there brought to light much loot taken from various Riverview homes.

However, for the moment, police were most interested in gaining complete information which could be used in rounding up all members of the Celestial Temple Society who had not fled the city.

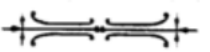
Searching Slippery they found, not only jewelry stolen from the Henley residence, but a booklet containing many names and telephone numbers.

"Sadie Beardsell," Penny read. "She's one of the members, I am sure."

Lest Mr. and Mrs. Hodges might also be arrested, she explained that the old couple had been an innocent dupe of Al Gepper. Turning to the medium she said:

"I think I know how you accomplished most of your tricks. Of course, you were the one who sent Mrs. Hodges a letter with six dollars. Undoubtedly, you had it mailed by an accomplice from New York at exactly the hour you specified. Then at that same hour you slipped up to the Hodges' cottage, and rapped six times on the bedroom wall."

"You seem to have everything figured out," Al Gepper responded sarcastically. "Clever girl!"



"I saw how you made the spirit painting tonight at the seance," resumed Penny. "May I ask if that same method was used in regard to Mrs. Weem's picture of Cousin David?"

She did not dream that the medium would answer her question. With a shrug which implied that the entire matter was very boring, he replied:

"No, the picture was painted with a solution of sulphocyanid of potassium and other chemicals, invisible until brought out with a re-agent. During the seance, an assistant sprayed the back of the canvas with an atomizer, bringing out the colors one by one."

"And how was the paint made to appear wet?"

"Poppy oil."

"One more question, Mr. Gepper. I never could understand how you were able to raise the kitchen table at Mrs. Hodges' cottage."

"No?" Al Gepper smiled mockingly. "I assure you I had nothing to do with that demonstration. It was a true spirit manifestation."

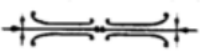
"I'll never believe that," declared Penny.

"Then figure it out for yourself," replied the medium. "You are such a very brilliant child."

Before the prisoners were led to the police car, Salt Sommers set up his camera and took a number of flashlight pictures for the _Star_.

"How about it, Mr. Parker?" inquired Jerry eagerly. "Are we putting out an extra?"

"We are," said the publisher crisply. "This is the big break I've been hoping we would get! We should beat the _Record_ on the story by at least a half hour."



The three men hurriedly left the Celestial Temple, with Penny trailing behind them. At the main street intersection they finally obtained a taxicab.

"To the _Star_ office," Mr. Parker ordered. "An extra dollar if you step on it."

"How about my pictures?" Salt Sommers asked, as the cab rocked around a corner. "They ought to be dandies."

"Rush them through as soon as we get to the office," Mr. Parker instructed. "If they're any good we'll run 'em on page one. Jerry, you handle the story--play it for all it's worth."

Jerry glanced at Penny who sat very still between her father and Salt. Their eyes met.

"Chief," he said, "there's a sort of fraternity among reporters —an unwritten rule that we never chisel on each other's work."

"What's that?" Mr. Parker asked, startled. "I don't get it."

Then his glance fell upon his daughter, and he smiled.

"Oh, so it's that way! You think Penny should write the story?"

"I do, Chief. It's hers from the ground floor up."

"Please, Dad, may I?" Penny pleaded.

The cab rolled up to the _Star_ office, stopping with a jerk. Mr. Parker swung open the door, helping her alight.

"The story is yours, Penny," he said. "That is, if you can crack it out fast enough to make the extra."

"I'll do it or die in the attempt."

"Keep to the facts and write terse, simple English--" Mr. Parker began, but Penny did not wait to hear his instructions.

With a triumphant laugh, she ran ahead into the _Star_ office. Her entry into the newsroom was both dramatic and noisy.

"Big scoop, Mr. DeWitt," she called cheerily. "Start the old print factory running full blast!"

Dropping into a chair behind the nearest typewriter, she began to write.

CHAPTER 25 EXTRA!

Penny stood at the window of her father's office, listening to the newsboys crying their wares on the street.

"_Extra! Extra! Read all about it! Police Capture Three in Raid on Celestial Temple! Extra! Extra!_"

Mr. Parker rocked back in his swivel chair, smiling at his daughter.

"Your story was first-class, Penny," he said. "Thanks to you we scooped the _Record_. Tired?"

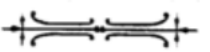
"I do feel rather washed out," Penny admitted. "Writing at high speed with a deadline jabbing you in the back is worse than facing a gang of crooks. But it was exciting."

"You turned in a good story," her father praised again. "In fact, you may as well take credit for breaking up that outfit of fake spiritualists."

"So far the police have only captured Al Gepper, Slippery and Pete. There's not much evidence against the others."

"True, but rest assured those who aren't rounded up will leave Riverview. The backbone of the organization has been smashed."

Penny sank wearily into a chair, picking up a copy of the _Star_ which lay on her father's desk. Two-inch, black headlines proclaimed the capture, and opening from the



banner was her own story tagged with a credit line: _by Penelope Parker_. Salt Sommer's photographs had made the front page, too, and there was a brief contribution by Jerry telling of Al Gepper's attempted flight in Leaping Lena.

"Dad, you must admit that it was a stroke of genius when I bought back that old car," remarked Penny. "Why, if it hadn't been for Lena, Al Gepper surely would have escaped."

"That and the fact you always run your cars on an empty tank," responded Mr. Parker. "I suppose you foresaw the future when you made your brilliant purchase?"

"Not exactly. It was just a feeling I had--the same sort of hunch which came to me when I found the silken ladder at Kano's Curio Shop. If I depended upon a mere brain to solve mysteries, why I'd be no better than the police."

"Your modesty overwhelms me," chuckled her father. "I'm thankful my other reporters aren't guided by their instincts. Otherwise I might have a scoop a day."

"There's one thing which annoys me," Penny said, frowning.

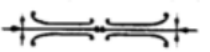
"And what is that?"

"Two of Al Gepper's tricks haven't been explained. How was he able to raise a table and read a message in a sealed envelope?"

"I was talking to the Chief of Police about that letter trick only this morning, Penny. Magicians often employ it. Wasn't the message written on a pad of paper before it was placed in the envelope?"

"Yes, it was."

"Then very likely Gepper read the message from the pad. He could have placed carbon paper beneath the second or third sheets. Possibly he resorted to a thin covering of paraffin wax which would be less noticeable."



"Now that I recall it, he did glance at the pad! How would you guess he lifted the table?"

"Were his hands held high above it, Penny?"

"Only an inch or two. However, he never touched the table. I was able to see that."

"Could he have used sharp, steel pins held between his fingers?"

"I doubt it. But I think I know what he may have used! Did you notice two small suction cups which were taken from his pockets by the police?"

"Well, no, I didn't, Penny."

"The longer I mull over it, the more I'm convinced he used them to raise the table. They could be held between the fingers and wouldn't be observed in a darkened room. Dad, if I can get those rubber cups from the police, I'll have some fun!"

The telephone rang. It was Mrs. Weems calling to ask if Penny were safe. Mr. Parker replied in the affirmative and handed the receiver to his daughter.

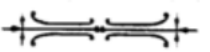
"Penny, I just read your story in the paper," the housekeeper scolded.

"You never should have pitted yourself against those dangerous men! I
declare, you need someone to watch you every minute."

"I need you," said Penny. "And so does Dad. Why not promise to stay with us instead of going away on a trip?"

"Of course, I'll remain," came Mrs. Weems' surprising answer. "I made up my mind to that two days ago. You and your father never could take care of yourselves."

"What will you do with your inheritance, Mrs. Weems?"



"I hope your father will invest it for me," replied the housekeeper meekly. "One thing I know. No medium will tell me what to do with it."

The hour was late. Penny felt relieved when her father locked his desk in preparation for leaving the office.

They walked through the newsroom, down the stairway to the street. A middle-aged man in a brown suit and derby hat alighted from a taxi, pausing as he saw them.

"Mr. Parker!" he called. "May I speak with you?"

The publisher turned, recognizing him. "Mr. Henley!" he exclaimed.

"I have just come from the police station," the advertiser said in an agitated voice. "I was told that your daughter is responsible for the capture of the men who robbed our home tonight."

"Yes, Penny managed to have a rather busy evening," smiled Mr. Parker. “I hope you suffered no loss."

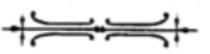
"Everything was recovered, thanks to your daughter. Miss Parker, I realize I never can properly express my appreciation."

"I was sorry I couldn't prevent the burglary," replied Penny stiffly. “As it turned out, the capture of the crooks was mostly due to luck."

"You are too modest," protested Mr. Henley. "I've talked with the police, you know. I am truly grateful."

The man hesitated, evidently wishing to say more, yet scarcely knowing how to shape his words. Penny and her father started to move away.

"Oh, about that contract we were discussing today," the advertiser said quickly.



"Yes?" Mr. Parker paused.

"I've been thinking it over. I acted too hastily in deciding to cancel."

"Mr. Henley, please do not feel that you are under obligation," said the publisher quietly. "Even though Penny accidentally did you a favor--"

"It's not that," Mr. Henley interrupted. "The _Star_ is a good paper."

"The best in Riverview," said Penny softly.

"Yes, it is!" Mr. Henley declared with sudden emphasis. "I tell you, Parker, I was irritated because of a trivial mistake in my firm's copy. I've cooled off now. Suppose we talk over the matter tomorrow at lunch."

"Very well," agreed Mr. Parker. "The Commodore Hotel at one."

Bowing to Penny, Mr. Henley retreated into a waiting taxi and drove away.

"How do you like that, Dad?" Penny inquired after a moment's silence.

"I like it," answered Mr. Parker. "The _Star_ could have limped along
without Mr. Henley. But the going would have been tough."

"He'll renew the old contract?"

"Oh, yes, and probably give us a better one. Stealing Mr. Henley's words, I am truly grateful."

Penny gazed at her father with twinkling eyes.

"Are those idle words, Dad? Or are you willing to back them in a material way?"

"I might," grinned Mr. Parker. "Present your bill."

"Well, Dad, I've discovered to my sorrow that I can't support two cars on my present allowance. I need a generous raise."

"You could get rid of Lena."

"Why, Dad! After her noble work tonight!"

"No, I suppose not," sighed Mr. Parker. "You've earned an increase, and I may as well grant it."

"Retroactive to the time I started working on the story," added Penny. “I figure if you pay back allowance, I'll be solvent once more!"

"You drive a hard bargain," chuckled the publisher. "But I'll agree."

Arm in arm, they started on down the street. Rounding a corner of the _Star_ building they abruptly paused before the plate-glass window to watch a long, unbroken sheet of white paper feed through the thundering press. Freshly inked newspapers, cut and folded, slid out one upon the other to be borne away for distribution.

"It's modern magic, isn't it, Dad?" Penny said reflectively as the great machine pounded in steady rhythm.

"Yes, Penny," her father agreed. "And for this edition, at least, you were the master magician!"

THE END

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